

Pablo Neruda's Political Poems: Documentation of Alternative Memories

Bhaskar Sarkar

M.A, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad

Abstract- Neruda has been criticised for realist imageries of both obscenity and love. Behind those apparent images, a historiographical journey has been documented through his poems. Latin American love in the voice of depressed downtrodden is actually Neruda's voice of the alternative whom we don't let speak in majoritarian history. Those mere memories of alternatives find their place in Neruda's documentation.

Keywords- Alternative memories, Historiography, Latin American Poetry, Political poems

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I. INTRODUCTION

Pablo Neruda was often referred as the Picasso of poetry with a capability of many styles and many voices. Neruda is a poet of revolution and a man of revolution against himself and his imagination. Being an active Communist party member, Neruda combined his political life with poetic life. His literary productions are weapons against fascism and panacea for those who are in the pain of love. His struggle for social justice was transformed through his political journey of Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the Cold War. Neruda accomplished variety of styles in his erotic, surrealist, historical and political poetries. He was an essential poet bound by a crafted yet natural vision for humanity with an incomplete voice. This vision for egalitarian humanity established him as a public poet with a language of people and that gave him an identity for entire Latin America. The poetic muse is any poet's psyche and the Nerudian muse is that of the entire continent and its people's hardship. Neruda's voice was the voice of proletarians, peasants, common people whose story of lives are forgotten in the field of global injustices. Although Neruda's tendency to become a voice for voiceless is highly criticized by many political thinkers; his perspectives are both about victories and defeats. Neruda defended Castro and Stalin for a long time and he was criticized for using 'misogynist' language in his poems. Neruda's understanding of Latin America justifies its journey of historical memories and an alternative account of political memories in the time of political turbulences throughout decades. His poems have a parallel voice of 'other' historical narratives which responds to the controversies of epoch gone.

II. THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

Neruda intersected his political dimension of poetry with the poetic dimension of politics going beyond a stereotypical intellectual-liberal binary. The late capitalist era, in which the objective of living is to reflect your status in global platform, needs to review Nerudian understanding of global politics that advocates egalitarianism and aestheticism more ethically. His political dimension of poetry is located in used metaphors, symbols and representations. Neruda's *Residence on Earth* (1933) was written when he was working on Madrid in mid-1930s. The Spanish Civil War's influence is clearly visible in his 'revolutionized' Spanish language. It talks about the essentiality of taking sides during social turbulences. The collection does not just ask us to join in global politics but to spread the voice of the voiceless in upcoming political struggles. In the poem *I am explaining few things* (1933), Neruda said,

*Spain emerges
and from every dead child a rifle with eyes,
and from every crime, bullets are born
which will one day find
the bull's eye of your hearts.
And you'll ask: why doesn't his poetry
speak of dreams and leaves
and the great volcanoes of his native land?*

The concluding solidarity to Spanish Civil War from Latin America with their own language, proves Neruda's political vastness that accounts the importance of a small act of rebellion and its global impacts and consequences. Another Latin American revolutionary Che Ernesto Guevara who advocated the Latin American relation with rest of the world, was also fond of Neruda. Neruda's documentation of personal solidarity creates a

self-proclaimed position of spokesperson, firstly for his continent Latin America, later as a global bard of rebellion and lost love. Amplification of personal beliefs in popular language gave Neruda a privilege to legitimize his political memory account, juxtaposed to the bourgeois account of history. Before entering into the political life, his *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924) gained reputation and represented his bohemian poet attitude as a countercultural figure against the rapid spread of bourgeoisie lifestyle and American imperialism.

The simplicity of public dialect makes his epics and poems accessible to everybody. The general perception about literature in economically backward societies is to classification of aestheticism and makes it a privileged leisure thing. Neruda maintained a clear distinction from this kind of traditionalist beliefs and used mere daily life incidents and instruments to make a parallel platform for common people's hardship and lost loves. The 'dailiness of life' in his language attracts many different homogeneous genres of admirers that follow his vastness of global inclusive politics. In the poem *But I saw it*, Neruda mourns,

A million dead Spaniards.

A million exiles.

*It seemed as if that thorn covered with blood
that would never be plucked from the conscience of mankind.*

The documentation of lived experiences is a common literary technique of Neruda. During the Spanish Civil War, he got acquainted with Garcia Lorca and Rafael Alberti who were famous revolutionary poets, later assassinated by General Franco's police. His poem dedicated to Rafael retained his comrades' struggles by correlating them with larger public domain. The poetic mourning was a political documentation against the oppressive power under strict rule. The absence of his comrade is present in the language of common which still remembers this historically forgotten moment. A poetry recollects the knowledge from generations and adequacy of memory makes it a functioning societal memory. The stylistic construction of a poem always depends on its alternative capability of new story-telling. Poem, being a critical societal memory, inserts into readers' mind and justifies the authenticity of the moment. Remarkably in the poem *I remember*, he stated,

I am the one who remembers,

although there are no eyes left on the earth

I'll go on seeing

and that blood

will be recorded here.

The poetic anger invokes a psychological solidarity in the mind of the reader to an unknown man's struggle. The age of capitalism categorizes people into genres of labors but Nerudian documentation of simplified public words in amplified rage promotes a social value to the voice of voiceless. The voiceless-ness is Neruda's weapon and his political poetries celebrate, resist and deconstruct this voiceless-ness. The alternate historiographical importance of Nerudian poetries is that it represents some certain incident in many perspectives and it opens the possibilities of another approach to the moment. This kind of allohistorical documentations reduces the overly imposed fabrication of macrohistory in order to cherish the voice of the rebellion of people. As a poet, Neruda wrote responsibly whenever the whole community needed him. He organized a conference of intellectuals to support the Spanish struggle and published a poetry review named *The Poets of the World Defend the Spanish People*. Interestingly history also remembers the Spanish Civil War as 'Poets' War'. Most of the Nerudian poems are to be oral poetries where his personal experience towards life is manifested in verses. The personal memory becomes collective memory when it reaches the public consciousness. The voice of the working class needs to be oral as the repression against it, has more hegemonizing power. In the poem *Great Happiness*, Neruda famously says,

At the gates of factories and mines I want

my poetry to cling to the earth

to the air, to the victory of abused mankind.

Neruda maintained a clear distinction between his political life and poetic life and simultaneously engaged it too. His working life as a communist party member entitled in many poems. For instance, the last lines of *I am explaining few things* are rhythmic vibration of the horror of fascism that constituted the short-lived battle cries. Poet with such emotional tenderness, sometimes uses that horror as a muse to emphasize on his political discourse. The horror that reflects on his poems, is his own metaphorical technique to politicize the dimension of poetry. German poets like Hans Magnus Enzensberger refused the regimentation of active politics and characterised the poetry as a language for all by calling off the ideological binaries that present politics creates. Neruda on the other hand understood poet as a political entity that precisely creates distance from the norms and talks about the people. A poet is a political communicator who engages the inspiration of struggle to an audible and linguistic habits. Interaction between language and politics can only be possible if the poet adopts the public's language discursively. The ultimate motto of Neruda's writing is spread the imagination of nation-less egalitarian world. The European and Latin American public discourses are familiar with Neruda's words but the

rest of the world lacks theorization of Nerudian understanding of art and politics. Now, Neruda is being popularized by neoliberal institutions in third world countries. The original Spanish and English translation are well read among bourgeois and privileged youths. For instances, in India, I find the general conceptualization about Nerudian poems is academically very elite in nature. Even the communist parties or the leftist cultural institutions never paid attention to Neruda's poetries like how they attentively propagated and transcribed Maxim Gorky. Neoliberal academic approach puts Neruda as just a poet of love and body imageries, nothing more. His political and historical poem are being ignored where ironically Neruda himself asked for countercultures.

In the search for poetic-political dimensions, Neruda's ideological motifs are often criticized for many reasons such as supporting Stalinism and extreme use of masculinism in poems. There are many men in Neruda's poems like brakemen, fishermen, woodcutter and miners who possess masculinist anger for rebellion and feminine pain for lost love. He dedicated his many poems to the women he ever loved, but most of them are seen through male gaze. The objectification of female body is often criticized in his poems. Besides that, Neruda always played the role of vanguard of revolution. A surrealist, Neruda revitalized everyday expressions and employed bold metaphors in free verse. His poems have a natural quest for simplicity that celebrates the Chilean landscapes and rage against the exploitation of the indigenous people whose alternative voices are long forgotten in Latin American popular culture. *Spain in Our Hearts* (1937) is Neruda's famous collection of poetries where he dismisses the regimentation of ideology and establishes his inclusive ideological stands. In the poem *Song for the Mothers of Slain Militiamen*, he passionately championed the voice of those forgotten memories,

*And just as in your hearts, mothers, there is in my heart so
much mourning and so much death that it is like a forest
drenched by the blood that killed their smiles, and into it
enter the rabid mists of vigilance with the rending loneliness of the days*

Neruda finds poetry as capable of giving birth to a new consciousness and his political poems are most likely to see the world as a one whole and the inclusion of all social classes and cultures is its politics. Human's natural tendency is to form a community; and interestingly exclusion of the rulers and making of an inclusive society are Nerudian counterculture which dismisses the capitalist model of neoliberalism which enhances borders and hegemonizes one over others. Scholars like Stephen Hart categorized Nerudian poems into two categories, one is the pre-political poetry and the other is the committed poetry. *Twenty Love Poems* (1924) is his earlier works and *Canto General* (1950) is from second category. Manuel Duran and Margery Arent Safir wrote a book named *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (1981), they say "*The Spanish Civil War was so critical in Neruda's development as a man and as a poet, that it becomes attractively simple to divide Neruda's poetry into two clear cut sections, parted by the great explosion of the war.*" Duran and Safir analyzed the ideological controversies on Neruda and found the inseparable bond between his poetic form and revolutionized, empathetic language. His political collections subjectively seem like propagandas but they are compassionate public speech. The changing language of Neruda's writing is a clear dimension of his political maturity. The first poem of *Residence I* (1975) is *Dead Gallop*, it begins as,

*Like ashes, like seas peopling themselves, in the
submerged slowness, in the shapelessness, or as
one hears from the crest of the roads the crossed
bells crossing, having that sound now sundered
from the metal, confused, ponderous, turning to
dust in the very milling of the too distant forms,
either remembered or not seen,
and the perfume of the plums that rolling on the ground
rot in time, infinitely green*

This kind of dense language is rare in Neruda's writings and the metaphors are difficult to understand. Metaphors like 'perfume of the plums' or 'false astrologies' from the poem *Taste* represented his surrealist ideas and the language is publicly inaccessible. But in political collections, the language itself sounds like a public address which talks about every entity in this world.

III. CONCLUSION

The aesthetic documentation of personal experiences, harsh realities and vision is itself an anti-authoritarian act. The hardships of Latin American people after the colonialism, destitution of Spanish people in fascism manipulated the rage of Neruda's poetico-political dimensions that theorized their long struggles in western philosophical perspectives. To uplift the status of a private poet to public-political poet, Neruda never forgot any enlightened poet's capabilities of comprehending social problems. Apart from his radical ideological beliefs, his love towards the indigenous people and their culture inspired in writing an alternative understanding of Latin America. Neruda's language connects through the hearts of common people, the 'poet of the people' Neruda says

in his *Memoirs* (1974) "My book was the pride of these men who had worked to bring out my poetry in the face of death. I learned that many carried copies of the book in their sacks, instead of their own food and clothing." His poems are inspirations to the cadres of revolution, bards of societal liberation and broken hearts of lost homes and loves. Neruda expressed his revolutionized Spanish language in common dialect through his many micro-cosmic alternative historical spheres in order to reinterpret the personal memory into public-political memory.

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