

Poetry as a Prospective Tool in Philosophical Counselling

Dr Richa Shukla

Assistant Professor, Department of English, B. K. Academy, University of Lucknow

Abstract

The present paper attempts to understand poetry as a powerful tool to address emotional problems among human beings. It reflects on the various notions of poetry by English and Indian thinkers and how their notion of poetry resembles the theories of philosophical counselling. The researcher also endeavours to develop her cognition of the metaphysical identity of humans, their social or scientific identity and how both concepts are linked together with the aid of literature. The researcher proposes poetry reading and writing as important tools to analyse one's inner world, explore the real cause of the problem, and contemplate and find a solution with the help of analytical arguments. This paper also attempts to reflect on poetry's contemplative and transformative values and significance in developing a positive health and worldview for a counsellee.

Keywords: *Poetry, Recollection, Contemplation, Tranquility, Counselling.*

The present paper attempts to understand poetry as a powerful tool to address emotional problems among human beings. It reflects on the various notions of poetry raised and explained by English and Indian thinkers and how their notion of poetry resembles the theories of philosophical counselling. The researcher also endeavours to develop her cognition on the quest for the metaphysical identity of humans, its relationship to their socio-cultural or scientific identity and how both concepts are linked with the help of literature. The researcher proposes poetry reading and writing as important tools to comprehend and analyse one's inner world, explore the real cause of the problem, and contemplate and find a solution facilitated by analytical arguments. This paper also attempts to reflect on the contemplative and transformative values of poetry and its significance in developing a positive health and worldview for counsellee.

Poetry has always been used to communicate the 'incredible unsaid'. Since the Vedic period, when most of the teaching-learning process is claimed to be based on rote learning, poetry has been used as a powerful tool. Many modern educationists could question the reason behind the rote-learning process because teaching content and the age of literacy are not well synchronised. Still, as far as I understand, this process was a sort of preliminary foundation

building for coming generations. Although Vedic hymns (*richas*) were being used as content of the gurukul syllabus, it should not be forgotten here that rigorous practices of skill education and religious and social exposure were also an inseparable part of their education. So, questioning about rote learning can be addressed on two grounds as education in the Vedic period focused on two different poles:

- Firstly, it focused on making children aware of their religious and socio-cultural requirements and fulfilment. The development of senses was also significant. So, this was a well-calculated strategy of the Vedic Education system to develop a socio-scientific identity for children.
- Secondly, it was fostering students with various mantras and poetic pieces on the grounds of cultivating morality, purity of character and a positive worldview. So, this was how Vedic Education developed a spiritual and metaphysical identity among children.

In this way, it may be rightfully asserted that a student's physical, mental and spiritual world was pivotal to the Vedic educators. It is to be noted here that Vedas, the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism, are composed in various poetic meters. The *Rigveda*, for example, is a collection of hymns, and its verses are written in a specific meter known as *Trishtubh*. Vedic hymns'

rhythmic and melodic qualities are integral to their poetic form. The *Upanisads*, ancient Indian philosophical texts that explore the nature of reality and the self, often contain poetic expressions. Ramayana and Mahabharata, two of the major Sanskrit epics, are written in a mix of prose and poetry and their narratives are often adorned with poetic descriptions, similes and metaphors. Here, the question arises: why are all the scriptures written in poetry? The response to this vital question paves the way for further discussion on the prospects of poetry as a tool in philosophical counselling.

In the second chapter of his renowned work, *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh seems to satisfy the quest of scriptures being written in poetic form. In the chapter *The Essence of Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo writes:

“The rhythmic word has a subtly sensible element, its sound value, a quite immaterial element, its significance or thought value, and both of these again, its sound and its sense, have separately and together a soul value, a direct spiritual power, which is infinitely the most important thing about them.” (Aurobindo, Sri, 1997, L 13)

Aurobindo considers poetry as “... the highest form of speech available to man for the expression whether of his self-vision or his world-vision” (Aurobindo, Sri, 1997, L 14). Comparing poetry and prose style, Aurobindo finds poetry as the finest degree of expression because:

“It expresses not only the life soul of man as did the primitive word, not only the ideas of his intelligence for which speech now usually serves, but the experience, the vision, the ideas, as we may say, of the higher and wider soul in him. Making them real to our life soul as well as present to our intellect, it opens to us by the word the doors of the Spirit.” (Aurobindo, Sri, 1997, L 16)

Technique, on the other hand, can also not be ignored as it plays a decisive role in the manifestation of poetry, i.e., to create musicality

and to have an extra impact on the readers’/ listeners’ minds. Good poetry, once created, cannot be manipulated in terms of its technical structure (e.g. meter, rhythm, rhymes, dictions and conceits); otherwise, its inherent meaning may get lost. It is thus crucial to derive an intact meaning from it without influencing its consistent and technical structure.

Not only this, but our grand narratives, in the form of poetic didacticism, were available to everyone irrespective of caste, creed, or language. The rote-learning tradition of the Vedic period should be appreciated as the process of foundational activity, where knowledge was credited into the intellectual accounts of the young ones with the hope that when they grow, they will have enough resources to deal with their day-to-day dilemmas.

Another allegation on poetry ‘as the pure work of imagination’ should also be addressed to understand the power of poetry as a tool for counselling. The criticism of poetry begins from the very time of Plato when he, in his reputed work *The Republic*, expelled poets out rightly from the ideal state. Poets were accused of spreading wrong information and polluting the youth. To counter this argument of Plato’s, Aristotle has critically examined its nature and compared it with other disciplines like History. While comparing poetry with history, Aristotle, in his *Poetics* (Chapter 9), claims that presenting an event in its most truthful manner is the job of a historian. It has nothing to do with the poet. A poet, for Aristotle, should be concerned with “... what sorts of things might happen, that is, the things possible according to likelihood or necessity.” (Aristotle, 1451a36-8)

Aristotle, here, doesn't see the poet as a ‘fact-gathering’ individual like historians; rather, he prefers to compare them with philosophers. He believes that, like philosophers, poets also can see various possibilities in a given situation. And so, a good poet “tends to speak the universals”. He says, “...that is why poetry is more philosophical than and superior to history- for poetry tends to speak of universals but history particular.” (Aristotle, 1451b5-7).

To analyse the modern-day relevance of poetry, it is important to revisit some popular definitions of poetry (from various literary periods). As we have seen earlier, Aristotle not only finds the difference between a historian and a poet, he also defines poetry as the "...mimetic or imitative use of language, rhythm and harmony, separately or in combination" (Aristotle, *Poetics*). Emily Dickinson opines that:

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of the head were taken off, I know that is poetry, these are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" (Dickinson, Emily, 1986, L342a)

A word painter like Emily Dickinson, here, seems to fail to define poetry technically because of the higher degree of communication in poetry. Her definition takes us back to Sri Aurobindo Ghosh when he says:

"What then is the nature of poetry, its essential law? What is the highest power we can demand from it, what the supreme music that the human mind reaching up and in and out to its own widest breadths, deepest depths and topmost summits, can extract from this self expressive instrument? and how out of that does there arise the possibility of its use as the mantra of the Real? Not that we need to spend any energy in a vain effort to define anything so profound, elusive and indefinable as the breath of poetic creation; to take the myriad-stringed harp of Saraswati to pieces for the purpose of scientific analysis is a narrow and barren amusement. But we stand in need of some guiding intuitions, some helpful descriptions which will serve to enlighten our search; to fix in that way, not by definition, but by description..." (Aurobindo, Sri, 1997, L 12).

Aurobindo Ghosh finds poetry indefinable. In other words, poetry for Aurobindo cannot be defined with the help of a few technical or scientific terms. Whereas 'reason and taste' for

him are "two powers of the intelligence, are rightly the supreme gods of the prose stylist, while to the poet they are only deities" (Aurobindo, Sri, 1997, L 16). Sri Aurobindo believes that:

"The privilege of the poet is to go beyond and discover that more intense illumination of speech that inspired word and supreme inevitable utterance, in which there meets the unity of a divine rhythmic movement with a depth of sense and a power of infinite suggestion welling up directly from the fountainheads of the spirit within us. He may not always or often find it, but to seek for it is the law or at least the highest trend of his utterance, and when he can not only find it, but cast into it some deeply revealed truth of the spirit itself, he utters the mantra." (Aurobindo, Sri, 1997, L 17).

Despite being an undefined genre, poets and critics have been putting their efforts into giving certain technical definitions. In 1798, with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth, a renowned romantic poet and critic, defined poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his work *Biographia Literaria*, describes poetry as "an activity of poet's mind" while a poem is "...that species of composition which is opposed to the works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure not truth."

In his work *The Study of Poetry*, Matthew Arnold defines poetry as 'the criticism of life'. Arnold is quite optimistic about the 'high destiny' of this genre with the belief that "mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." (Ward, T.H., "General Introduction" to the English Poets, 1880, University of Washington)

Quite contrary to William Wordsworth's definition of poetry, T.S. Eliot, in his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*, defines poetry as "...not a turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of the personality but an escape from personality"

(Eliot, 1919, p. 73). Not only this, Eliot suggests that a poet's mind should work like a 'catalyst'. For the precision of his definition, Eliot presents the analogy of the reaction of Sulphur dioxide and oxygen where the platinum filament plays the role of a catalyst. He illustrates this idea by making poets aware of the imbalanced emotions and keeping them away from writing because the overflow of emotions might lead to complete chaos. For T. S. Eliot, "... the bad poet is usually unconscious where ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious". (Ibid)

In other words, we can say that Eliot has kept emotions on the second pedestal while thoughts and feelings are kept at a higher position. Despite all the above discussions, Eliot cannot deny that emotions, like thoughts and feelings, play a vital role in poetry. After all, no results will be found in the absence of an appropriate catalyst at a certain speed.

I.A. Richards, a well-known English educator and literary critic, also suggests a more scientific interpretation of poetry. For him, poetic truth is different from scientific truths that are purely based on facts. As he says, "The statements in poetry are there as a means to manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes." Poetry communicates feelings and emotions. Hence, poetic truth is different from scientific truth. It is a matter of emotional belief rather than intellectual belief. (web: <https://drdevika.wordpress.com/2016/11/12/i-a-richards-practical-criticism/>)

Richards considers the human mind as a complete system of impulses or attitudes. Different impulses, for him, are nothing but contradictory instincts, desires and demands. Richards calls them 'appetencies' as opposed to 'aversions' in the human mind. These appetencies create restlessness and give birth to innumerable questions. The only way to attain solace is the process of adjustment and re-adjustment that keeps going, but they again give birth to other dilemmas. In such a situation, it is difficult to satiate all the impulses at the same time, so another possibility to attain peace is to satiate the

maximum number of impulses and to keep very few impulses frustrated.

According to Richards, poetry plays a significant role. It can enable human beings to achieve a state of 'poise'. Richards considers poetry as the best way to control such misbalances. He seems to consider poetry as the true solution to such uniquely ordered impulses of mind. Good poetry, on the one hand, satisfies the poet's unique order of impulses and can play the same role for the reader (client). In this way, it may prove to be a relevant tool to attain emotional balance, mental equilibrium and, finally, serenity of mind.

Based on the above notions of poetry, we find the following conclusions:

- Poetry should not be understood as fact-revealing expression; rather, expression through poetry reveals a 'heightened truth' that is universal by nature.
- The subject matter of poetry is mimetic (imitation of some phenomenon) by nature; hence, its delineation and presentation are efficient in establishing a cordial connection with its readers. So, it can easily influence human emotions, attitudes and behaviour.
- Consistent storage of emotions can give birth to powerful poetry. Poetry, as an essence of life, offers a wide space to writers and readers for self-identification, contemplation, introspection and transformation.
- Poetry can be a powerful tool to systematise and order the imbalances of human desires, quests and cravings.
- Poetry might be helpful to fill the gaps, to find the state of equilibrium and finally, to attain peace of mind.

To understand the use of poetry as a powerful tool in philosophical counselling, one should be aware of the different stages of poetic creation and have a fair understanding of the nature of a 'philosophical discourse'. Philosophy investigates basic life issues such as what a meaningful life is, what true love is, and what is morally right or wrong. These issues concern not only philosophy professors but every person

capable of reflecting on their life (Lahav, Ran, 2013, p.83).

The term “philosophical counselling” is commonly used to include any counselling session between a philosopher-practitioner who serves as a philosophical counsellor and an individual counsee. Philosophical counselling can be seen as an attempt to revive those ancient philosophical traditions that sought to guide the individual towards ataraxia, i.e., a ‘good life’ (Ibid). In my opinion, the use of poetry becomes useful here because the stages of composition (based on William Wordsworth’s stages of poetic creation in *Preface to Lyrical Ballad*) have a close affinity with the PEACE model (Problem, Emotion, Analyses, Contemplation, Equilibrium) proposed by Lou Marinoff. These are:

1. Observation,
2. Recollection,
3. Contemplation,
4. Recrudescence or Renewal of Emotions,
5. Composition.

Let us understand these stages one by one:

Observation: In the first two stages of the PEACE Process, the problem and the emotional reactions that it triggers are identified. These emotions must be experienced authentically and expressed beneficially. This can be compared with the stage of sense perception in any poetic creation, where the beholder comes in touch with some phenomenon (stimulus) for the first time. Since she cannot create poetry immediately, the feelings or emotions aroused at the observation go deeper into the subconscious mind.

Recollection: In this stage, the poet recollects his emotions in tranquillity. The poet stirs his subconscious to discover what has been hidden for a long time. He encounters with the emotions and hidden questions. This stage of recollection is quite similar to the stage of Problem and Emotion given by Lou Marinoff. Marinoff claims that “most psychology and psychiatry never progress beyond this stage”. But having a close affinity with philosophy, a good poem is wider than these two stages.

Contemplation: In the third stage of the PEACE Process, options for addressing the problem are listed and weighed. In the stage of poetic creation, the poet analyses the emotion. Since the poet cannot recreate the problem or event, he revives the emotions subsequently roused during observation. Tranquility is critical in these three stages when the poet starts contemplating and analysing those emotions. These emotions are extremely personal for the poet, but if we examine Aristotle’s idea of the universality of poetry, these emotions have some resemblance with the readers’ emotions. This may serve the purpose in two ways: Either the reader will start contemplating and analysing his own emotions like the poet, or he will have empathy for the poet, which will also help him to analyse his own emotions.

Recrudescence or Renewal of Emotions: In the fourth stage of the Peace Process, the client obtains a ‘philosophical disposition’ through exploring, with the counsellor, the philosophical framework within which what transpired in the first three stages would make sense to the client. This can be compared with the phase of renewal of emotions of poetic creation. As Wordsworth says: “...the tranquillity of contemplation disappears after a time, and then the poet filters all his thoughts by eliminating some and keeping others so that the original emotion is recreated in a way that is more universal.” (Wordsworth, 1800, p.12)

At this stage, the stimulus of all the emotions becomes secondary, and the emotions in their abstract form are renewed.

Composition: In the last and fifth stage of the PEACE Process, the client reaches equilibrium, that is, “understands the essence of [his/her] problem and are ready to take appropriate and justifiable action” (Dirk Louw, 2013, p.62). Similarly, in the stage of poetic creation, the poet finally gives words to these emotions, which have become more universal than a personal one. It reminds us of Richard’s theory of poetry, which says that the poet attempts to adjust and readjust to his impulses, desires and wants during composition. This way of creating a poem helps him to restructure his previous thoughts.

The clients, who oscillate between the various questions arising in their subconscious, find a better scope to get the answers or make a decision. This might prove to be the culmination point for both the client as a reader and the client as a writer simultaneously.

Here, one may ask that the poet's context differ from the reader's, so their interpretation might also differ. Still, one must remember that any good poetic piece of literature must be handled carefully for therapeutic purposes. Poetry is a complete mental process, and the poem is one of the offshoots of this process. When poetry is offered to read and interpreted by the client, the counsellor has to understand that the emotions during the stage of recrudescence have nothing to do with the client's emotions. Rather, such poems will only play the role of a catalyst to let him think and analyse (as we see in the connection between poetry and the reader in general) his emotions. It doesn't provide any specific lenses to observe the phenomenon; it is more like a mirror representation of clients' thoughts.

On the other hand, when a client is asked to write a poem, he would have to go through all the stages of poetic creation. In this process, from observation to composition, he will put effort into systematising his impulses and desires. This process of adjustment and readjustment under the supervision of a professional counsellor might clear his doubts.

Using poetry for therapeutic purposes in psychotherapy has already started in many countries. These days, poems are written for therapeutic purposes. My attempt in this paper is to understand the philosophical nature of poetry and how it can contribute to the field of philosophical counselling. Many innovations in writing poetry, like contemplative poetry and transformative poetry, can make the client think about their problems with a more analytical and newer perspective.

Neil Korobov, in his article *Poetry as a Contemplative Pedagogical Practice*, says that *contemplative poetry may transform the whole worldview for life*. If someone is reading a good contemplative poem, he cannot undo its effects.

Korobov remarks that primarily if "you are stuck with it, and if you are open enough and ready enough for how the encounter with poetic resonance invites you to shift your perspective, it will transform you." (Korobov, 25)

Secondly, Korobov believes that poetry is "...a kind of language that disarms you whether you want it to or not. This suggests that most of the time, we are well-armored against various forms of revelation as well as incarnation. Poetry is the language that unblocks or circumvents the armour somehow and apprehends you. You suddenly find yourself confronted and incapable of fortifying yourself from the truth." (Korobov, 26)

Let's have a look at the poem 'Sweet Darkness' here:

"You must learn one thing
 The world was made to be free in'
 Give up all other worlds
 Except the one to which you belong
 Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
 Confinement of your aloneness
 to learn
 anything or anyone
 that does not bring you alive
 is too small for you"
 - (Whyte, David, 1997)

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be said that the poetic truth always differs from the scientific truth based on evidence. It is also different from a historian's fact-gathering skills. It is close to philosophy, which analyses and reflects based on possibilities. Writing a poem is not as simple as the overflow of emotions, but poetry is a complete process, or, I must say a philosophical process. It is not purely the result of imagination and speculation; it demands proper recollection, contemplation and analysis of emotions. Close to the philosophical venture of counselling and very close to the heart of readers, poetry is not just a piece of art. It can bridge a philosophical mind and a client's heart. It has got a divine soul.

It can drag you back to the past, show you the future and then bring you back to the present, dissolving the dilemma and establishing a logical equilibrium of state of mind. Here, a poet, like a philosophical counsellor, can play the role of catalyst to speed up the process of finding answers to the hidden questions of the human mind. Good poetry will be beneficial, whether some poet or some client writes it. A philosophical counsellor can also store these poems written by the clients for further use. In the five stages of creating a poem, a client might benefit by thinking about his problems from

various perspectives. My claim in this paper is not to establish poetry as an independent school of counselling; rather, it might be helpful for practitioners to include poetry reading and writing as tools in their daily philosophical practices. Not only English poetry but a good poem in any language may prove its relevance in philosophical counselling. It will certainly not show the right path to clients, but yes, it will open various windows of perspectives to choose and decide.

References

- Aristotle A. & Butcher S. H. (1895). *The poetics; translated with a critical text by S.H. Butcher*. Macmillan.
- Armstrong, J. M. (1998). Aristotle on the Philosophical Nature of Poetry. *The Classical Quarterly*, 48(2), 447–455. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639834>
- Arnold M. & Bouton A. L. (1927). *Matthew Arnold's prose and poetry*. C. Scribner's Sons.
- Coleridge, S.T. (2017). *Biographia Literaria*, Createspace Independent Pub.
- Dickinson, E. (1971). *Selected Letters*. Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Eliot T.S. (Dec 1919). Tradition and Individual Talent. *The Egoist*.
- Ghosh A. (1953). *The Future Poetry*. SABCL.
- Korobov, N. (2022). Poetry as a Contemplative Pedagogical Practice. *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 9 (2). <http://journal.contemplativeinquiry.org>
- Lahav, R. (2013). Philosophical Counseling and Self Transformation. *Philosophy, Counseling, and Psychotherapy*, (p.83) Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Louw, D. (2013). Defining Philosophical Counselling: An Overview. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, (2013).32(1): 60-70.
- Ralte, J.Z. *Introduction to Philosophical Counselling*. <https://www.academia.edu>
- Richards, I. A. (1929). *Practical criticism: A study of literary judgement*, Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Tagore, R. (1918). Aurobindo Ghosh: The Essence of Poetry, *Lover's Gift and Crossing*. Macmillan.
- Wordsworth W. & Coleridge S. T. (1798). *Lyrical ballads: with a few other poems*. Printed for J. & A. Arch Gracechurch-street.
- Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry* <https://ddu.collegedu.ac.in/>