



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**CRITIQUING MODERNITY: A STUDY ON THE POSTCOLONIAL
'HOMECOMING' IN R PARTHASARATHY'S *ROUGH PASSAGE***Mr. Abdul Samad K^{1*} & Dr. Basheer Kotta²

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2024.11302>

ABSTRACT

R Parthasarathy's verses have won critical acclaim for their distant yet passionate evocation of the modernist themes in Indian English poetry. Listed among the literary modernists of the post-independent era headed by Nissim Ezekiel, he blended the modernist alienation with postcolonial disillusionment and created a distinctive 'Indian English idiom' to express the deep concerns of the postcolonial societies. Drawing heavily from Indian regional cultural resources, his poetry follows the mimicking subjects from the colonies, their disenchantment with the coloniser and the journey home. This enables him to champion the cause of postcolonial cultural assertion without compromising the narrative conventions of literary modernism. Contextualising the poetic collection *Rough Passage*, the paper analyses the cultural implications of Parthasarathy's poetry and argues that the culture he presented as Indian are largely high cultural forms and thus his poetry falls prey to the cultural debate in Britain in the early 20th century. Contrasting high and low cultural forms present in the collection, the paper exposes the role colonial cultural thought plays in the formulation of postcolonial discourses.

Keywords: *Literary Modernism, Indian English Poetry, Cultural Debate, Homecoming*

**Article history:**

Received on : 13-07-2024

Accepted on : 28-07-2024

Available online: 07-08-2024



INTRODUCTION

R Parthasarathy is one of the most distinguished modernist voices in postcolonial Indian English poetry. Differing from other Indian English writers who have joined the extremely detached narratives on India popularised by poets like A K Ramanujan, Parthasarathy has succeeded in synthesising the ironic aloofness with a deep rooted lament for the cultural disintegration of his home. His valorisation of modernist verses of the post independent era has been subject to severe criticism. In the introduction to *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, he writes "In examining the phenomenon of Indian verse in English, one comes up, first of all, against the paradox that it did not seriously begin to exist till after the withdrawal of the British from India"(p-3). This attempt to place the entire canon of Indian English poetry into the binary of modern and premodern and the resultant anti traditional stance need critical attention as literary modernism has anchored on cultural binaries.

Literary modernism is known for its reverence for high culture and the case of Indian modernist writers are not different. The emergence of the British working class/ mass culture in the second half of the twentieth century was treated as a threat to high culture. Modernists like TS Eliot lamented the disintegration of high cultural values and they stood for the elitist tendencies in the cultural debate. As T S Eliot observes "I have observed with growing anxiety the career of this word culture during the last six of seven years. We may find it natural and significant that during a period of unparalleled destructiveness, this word comes to have an important role" (17), modernists attempted to uphold those values and

severely criticised the emergence of mass cultural products. It is from this cultural context, we have the emergence of cultural studies and the highly valued cultural norms were realised as elitist. Cultural theoreticians like Raymond Williams argue that culture is ordinary and it comes from the everyday life of the people.

Indian modernists poets also subscribed to the values of British modernism. As the majority of English educated Indians hail from the upper castes, their culture replaced the British high culture in Indian modernist writing. This is to say that Indian modernist writers follow the lamentation of the British on the disintegration of high culture. This is much more complicated as these writers come from a colony, the subaltern communities were subject to cultural marginalisation which was similar to the experience of the British working class. As colonial subjects, they were doubly colonised and they were misrepresented in large chunks of Indian English modernist writings. This paper analyses the traces of high culture in the poetic collection of R Parthasarathy and thus unveils the cultural ambiguities made invisible in Indian modernism. I have chosen *Rough Passage* as a representative work of Indian English modernism and the poet's high sensitivity to cultural and linguistic concerns.

Parthasarathy's engagement with Indian postcolonial experience puts him apart from any other writer of his group. He has effectively articulated the anxieties, fears and displacement of the postcolonial subjects. One of the key contributions of Parthasarathy is his skillful creation of a postcolonial idiom in which he portrays the cultural consequences of the colonial process. The sensitivity shown in his narratives on



postcoloniality and the impact of the colonial process on colonised cultures are worth noting. In the much anthologized collection of poems *The Rough Passage*, he narrates various forms of subjugation the colonial subject underwent and traces the cultural shifts of pre and post independent India. This collection is divided into three sections.

ARTICULATION OF THE POSTCOLONIAL IDIOM

The first section titled 'Exile' marks the desire of the subjects to land in the land of the coloniser. Interestingly colonial administration, education and the civilising mission have triggered this longing to run away from home. Parthasarathy's verses have deftly presented an anxious Indian young man reaching out to the western shore spell bound by the splendour of the coloniser. Unlike other Indian English Writers who have captured the political subjugation of the people, he has painted the desire for dominant power in cultural and psychological terms as "whoring after English Gods". This has enabled the writer to look at the colonial process as a subtle cultural issue that has to be explored at the level of the individual experience. One of the striking qualities of Parthasarathy's verse is his ability to link an extremely personal experience with a critical historical moment that he is going through. His acute sense of location and cultural identity and his fear of losing the colonised identity is narrated in 'The Exile' in terms of the deep rooted relation between language and culture. As these lines testifies

He had spent his youth whoring
after English Gods.

There is something to be said for exile:

you learn roots are deep.

That language is a tree, loses colour

under another sky. (75)

Postcolonial critics have appreciated Parthasarathy's deft narrative of the postcolonial condition. His critique of hegemonic colonial culture and desire for native cultural roots have often been regarded as an integral part of postcolonial writings and his poems are highly anthologised. A critical examination of this desire for one's native sky will reveal to us that this is an attempt to go back to a precolonial pristine native culture and it also rejects cultural hybridities which have been an integral part of Indian culture which the colonial process has intensified. An essentialist notion of culture is prevalent in this collection and this can be demonstrated by reading the second and third sections.

In the second section titled 'The Trial', the protagonist goes through a self trial in which the disenchantment with the colonial and the resultant fall is portrayed. In this section he further develops his self critique of his identities and feels guilty of leaving home. This is the moment of realisation of cultural identities and displacement. One of the key features of this section is its ability to capture the wider political issue of colonial displacement with that of individual loss. He weaves a story of a person's search and loss with that of a nation's transformation. This epiphanic moment is characteristic of his poems and it gives vent to the postcolonial condition of loss of identity. In this phase, the colonial subjects return home.

The third section of the collection is titled 'Homecoming' concludes the poem. Here the detached protagonist returns home expecting the country he left and feels betrayed as the home has also transformed under colonial process. In this



phase, the modernist narrator laments over the loss of home, the degradation sets into the culture and hopes for the pristine culture that, he believes, once existed.

The cultural desire of homecoming is a central concern in postcolonial literature. The tendency to recollect a romantic homeland forms the diasporic imagination across the globe. This can be traced in the writings of African, Caribbean and Asian communities and the disillusionment that follows marks the hybrid nature of postcolonial societies which often these writers ignore. Analysing the history of black transatlantic culture, Paul Gilroy addresses this dilemma of the diaspora. He uses the variants of the term 'root' and 'route' to explain the crisis of the diaspora. The first word 'root' refers to the imaginary roots of the migrant. As already mentioned, this desire for an untainted pristine cultural past is a frequent obsession of the diaspora. It lingers on his present and the roots are believed to bring the pre colonial past alive. The second term 'route' implies the journeys undertaken by the migrant and the resultant changes occurred in the process. This term implies the impossibility of returning home and also emphasises on the routes they have travelled. Home is believed to have changed the moment the migrant set out.

Home has been imagined in multiple ways. One of the most common ways of describing home is imagining a pristine culture which is not altered by the passage of time. This concept of a fixed home is a necessity of the postcolonial condition as it attempts to invent a tradition that is often created by the present as per the pressing demand of the time. Inventing tradition is a political act. In his

groundbreaking study titled *The Invented Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm observes that Invented Tradition "is a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour, by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past"(p-1). This deliberate attempt to invent a tradition was very much prevalent in the 19th century as it was an age of rapid change and creating a facade of tradition enables humans to forge a past which they never lived. It is clear that *Rough Passage* offers so many instances of inventing cultural traditions and the lament over the loss of them. Though this can be taken as response to the colonial process and the historical conditions of the time, these false inventions often desist from historical realities and often act as a fabricated past with which dominant groups exercise power over the subordinated groups.

THE CULTURAL DEBATE IN *ROUGH PASSAGE*

These imagined homes often negate the plurality and gradual transformation of the native cultures and construct a homogenous past and impose cultural norms on the present. The recurrent appearances of the ancestral houses in modernist verses should be viewed from this perspective. These ancestral houses not only housed people in the feudal era, they were also institutions which exercised ruthless power on the underdogs. Modernists are usually described as anti traditional, but in Indian English modernist writing, one can have any number of instances in which the speaker of the poem wishes to return to the feudal household. These narratives project the pre colonial family relations as a common feature but ignore historical reality and the experiences of the



subaltern groups within these feudal households. In addition to this, the elites of the postcolonial societies have attempted to construct a monoculture which denies the struggles of the subaltern communities to achieve social equality. This hegemony is established within the context of colonial institutions and gets legitimised.

The insistence on a pure cultural home triggers the search for untainted racial and cultural origins which gives way to the reassertion of a precolonial hegemonic cultural domination and negates historic developments communities have achieved over the years. This search for home and the resultant disenchantment can be observed from the Nobel Prize winning Trinidadian writer V S Naipaul's engagement with India. He visits India and comments that the home does not offer him the solace he expected and adds that the village in eastern Uttar Pradesh where his ancestral house was located is in disintegrated condition and it is known for its backwardness and Buddhism. Analysing the frustration expressed by Naipaul, Ashish Nandy observes that Naipaul's imagination of home is conditioned by colonial discourse, hence his contempt for India is to be read within the cultural crisis he has pushed into by living in a British colony. Nandy makes the point clearer by explaining the nature of India Naipaul imagines and remarks that such an India did not exist and this imagination is coloured by the need to produce a counter narrative to colonialism which the novelist admires and rejects (65). It is a significant cultural act to contextualise Indian English poetry within this wider postcolonial framework.

In the third section of the collection, titled 'Homecoming' begins with contrasting the age-old benchmark of traditional culture and the mass cultural production on the other. In the poem, he describes the language wrenched from the Kural and the present tamil is associated with celluloid. Here, Kural stands as an icon of the canon of tamil high culture which has been fixed in a particular moment and the contemporary tamil spoken in the film world is material and corrupt. This hierarchy between print and visual culture, high and low cultural forms is a significant debate in cultural studies. Though early cultural critics like Richard Hogarth and Raymond Williams critiqued the monopoly of cultural acceptance to high culture, they too rejected mass cultural forms. Cultural Studies as a discipline emerges from the cultural debate and eventually culture is redefined. It is commonplace that all cultural practices irrespective of class, gender, ethnicity etc... are to be considered as cultural productions.

Cultural studies rejects the primacy given to canonical literature which was practised by high modernist literary critics like TS Eliot, F R Leavis and argues that all cultural forms are equally valid. Tracing the origin and development of cultural studies, Stuart Hall observes that cultural studies emerges as a new discipline when it breaks away from the definition of culture offered by modernist literary critics (57). In the Homecoming section of *Rough Passage*, the poet presents Kural, a canonical text in Tamil literature, as a benchmark of high culture and places celluloid, an influential mass media, corrupt. This binary representation of cultural forms underscores the high cultural bias of literary



modernism, though often it is not identified within the context postcolonial longing for home. Placing Kural and Celluloid as forms of culture out of which the first one is of high cultural value and stands for the glory of the native culture whereas the latter is associated with cultural decay is a project of modernity. This narrative continues in the subsequent parts of the third section. A polluted river follows the image of film language and suggests the degradation set in the native culture. The poet quotes

Speak a tired language
wrenched from its sleep in the *Kural*,
teeth, palate, lips still new
to its agglutinative touch.

.....

Now, hooked on celluloid, you reel
down plush corridors. (80)

It is very much clear from these lines that the ascetic nature prioritised by modernism is misunderstood as anticolonial.

This cultural binary creates a crisis in newly emerging postcolonial societies as the aspirations of the marginalised communities are placed against the homecoming of the nationalist elite who define culture in terms of the traditional notions. The home as a romantic abode is repeated in the postcolonial imagination and it reiterates the values of high culture which otherises the mass cultural productions. Ironically the emerging cultures are represented as corrupted by materialistic western culture and it is viewed as a byproduct of the mass productions. In fact these multicultural products are not completely a western project, instead they are

indianised cultural productions, in that sense truly hybrid.

The arguments supporting the inane features of indigenous culture and that of mass production are valid in the particular cultural context of postcolonial societies. In this scenario, the concept of hybridity is highly relevant. As Homi K Bhaba observes,

The social articulation of difference....is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorised power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'(p-2)

Literary modernists do not acknowledge the plural nature of colonised cultures and refuse to synchronise with hybrid cultures emerging in the colonies. They privilege canonical print literature and label mass cultural forms as cultural decay. This narrative of high culture is not subject to scrutiny as they are treated postcolonial longings of the diaspora.

In another popular section of the Homecoming, Parthasarathy narrates the disintegration of culture by describing the river in summer. This section is often titled as "River Once" and makes an evocative narrative of cultural disintegration that the native culture is set in as part of the colonial process. Here too the poetic images of degradation are drawn from the underprivileged cultural groups. Though degeneration of the ecology is an aspect of all



industrial societies, the poet has brought out exclusive culture specific imagery which downplays the democratisation of the native people. A casual look at traditional Indian literature will tell us that 'river' is a recurrent symbol of cultural glory. In traditional Indian literature rivers are often associated with women and culture, as result they are narrated in hyperbolic terms. In River Once, the poet narrates a contaminated river and it links with the degradation set in the culture as well. Though this can be taken as a common fall of a pristine environment, the cultural marking hints at the underdogs.

With paper boats boys tickle her ribs,
and Buffalos have turned her to a pond.
There's eaglewood in her hair
and stale flowers (82)

The presence of buffalos in the river may appear natural and their role in polluting the river is highlighted. Literature is to be understood as cultural representation and the politics of representation force us to review the role different images used in cultural production. It is very much clear buffaloes are usually associated with lower caste people in India. In the case of America, the red Indians depend solely on buffalos for their survival. In an evocative poem, EE Cummings exposes the role of American heroes in killing buffalos which results in the extinction of the red indian tribes. In Indian context, Dalit politics has identified buffaloes as part of their struggles for survival. It is also to be remembered that they are placed in contrast to cow nationalism of the upper caste. In his political formulations, Kancha Ilayya coined 'Buffalo Nationalism' to refer to the alternative spirituality of the lower castes in India.

Though this may be taken as a misreading, one can not ignore the fact that literary representations have cultural implications.

CONCLUSION

The invention of tradition is a product of the complex cultural demand of the postcolonial societies and it is to be located within the plural traditions of emerging cultures. Any attempt to fix cultural values to a specific historical moment is a denial of the dynamics of cultural change and it marginalises the historical struggles these communities are making to create a multicultural democratic social system. Postcolonial societies have to reconfigure cultural norms which accommodate various cultures displaced by the colonial process. Critiquing colonial discourse often leads to the glorification of the elitist cultural norms of the colonised which leads to the establishment of hegemonic norms of the precolonial era and negates the possibilities of liberation of the subaltern communities.

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