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A comparative study of linguistic preferences in the writings of Indian poets

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Abstract

Multiculturalism is the very essence of being an Indian. The identity which an individual gains through his/her writings is that of a secular being. As expressed several times that a best writer is the one who is unbiased and free from all sorts of prejudices. This paper studies and analyses the multicultural elements of certain Indian writers who carry with them the essence of different cultures but ultimately chose to express their mind in one particular language which helped them to speak their heart out. Whether it is Jayant Mahapatra who wrote in Odiya as well as in English or it is A.K Ramanujan who being a trilingual writer wrote in English, Kannada and

Telegu. Kamala Das who always looks at herself as an individual who stands divided between her supposed lingual identities or it is Ruskin Bond who being an Anglo-Indian feels more proximate towards the Indian soil as compared to his very own European identity. I tried to bring out the psychological insights of such writers and their struggles for the alienating individuality in order to establish the identity of their preferences in their multicultural upbringing. The cultural ambivalence and personal dilemma plays the role of a catalyst for them to emerge as an individual of exceptional identity with authority.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, secular, cultures, identity, lingual identity, psychological, cultural ambivalence, personal dilemma, alienation, individuality

Introduction

On my quest to bring out the cultural ambivalence and personal dilemma of writers like Jayant Mahapatra, A. K Ramanujan, Kamala Das and Ruskin Bond, I would like to first talk about the background of their struggle for identity. It would be really insightful for scholars like us to get to know about what kind of struggles they came across on being a diaspora or rather being compelled to feel as a diaspora, being an Anglo-Indian, a bilingual or a trilingual, there was a choice of the preferred lingual approach when it comes to express themselves through their writings together with the subject for that matter. Such questions often establish a writer as an object of immense criticism as well as appreciation.

Jayant Mahapatra is one of the prolific writers with more than sixteen collections to his credit. His major collections are: Close the Sky, Ten By Ten (1971), Rain of Rites(1976), Waiting (1979), The False Start(1980), Relationship(1980), Life Signs(1983), The Temple(1989), Random Descent (2005),Swayamvara and Other Poems (1971) and many more. Vilas Sarang describes Mahapatra as a “phenomenon of special significance” and talks of his poetry as “the funeral pyres burn unceasingly on the banks of Mahapatra’s poetic world”. As a poet with a sharp sensitivity, his verse is surrounded with images of intense despair, disease and disillusionment. Death, rains and the grand Jagannath temple have a frequent appearance in Mahapatra’s poetry. He was born and brought up in Orissa hence the culture and the regional language had much stronger grip on the writer. Still the post-colonial sphere of the Indian subcontinent was gaining a strong grip over the contemporary writers. They found English to be a better medium to express their hidden desires and express their disillusionment in form of poetry. The other possible reason is to gain country as well as worldwide readership as English was gaining the status of an international language, the medium of expression most widely understood and accepted.

There is a deep seated irony and satire in his poetry which reinforces the poignant contemplative character in his narratives. In terms of his writing, Mahapatra is a highly sensitive poet, he employs the images of deep pain and nostalgia, surrounding with the rituals and traditions of Orissa. He focuses to bring out the grotesque and grim reality of the contemporary Indian landscape. He writes about Indian lives seen through a series of dominant metaphors and idioms, he uses the language of cohesion and contradiction. Another reason of using English as the most preferred medium of expression is to communicate the consciousness of death, desire for a just society with communal harmony together with the writer’s concern for humanity.

Mahapatra’s poetry is redolent of the Orissa scene and the grand Jagannatha temple at Puri is a recurrent image of his poetry. His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sensuality in the earlier

Poetry and the social and political scene in some of his later poems. His style has an admirable colloquial ease, punctuated by thrusts of striking images as, for instance, 'his lean-to opened like wound' and 'the one wide-street / Lolls out like a giant tongue'. His muted brooding occasionally results in extremes of either excessively cryptic statement or verbal redundancy and in weaker moments he is seen echoing other poets, as in the "Eliotesque" 'morning/ Like pale yellow linen'; but his better work indicates a poetic voice which promises to gather strength in the years to come.

G. J. V. Prasad comments that "Mahapatra's sense of displacement stems from his Christianity, a legacy from his grandfather who had to embrace Christianity while starving during the famine of 1866". Prasad's comment suggests that on embracing Christianity, they accepted the rule of the colonizers together with accepting their mannerisms. The poet alternates between tradition and modernity, customs and consequences which play a major role in binding him to his family and his village. He is actually a product of post-colonial domain, his poems express that he doesn't want to live in past but is constantly drawn towards the duties and responsibilities of his father's cultural and familial heritage. He suffers from existential crisis and is unable to control his anguish which he keeps expressing in his writings, he is certainly trapped in a culture of tradition and hierarchy. Death, old age, lost memories, dilapidated towns, and the brazen landscape reflect a lack and deep emptiness in the writers mind. The writer feels as if he belongs to nowhere and hence uses his language as a medium to reconnect with the world.

Another writer in this sequence is Kamala Das, I believe to consider her a poet of more mature and firm personality. She is a bilingual poet, writing both in English and Malayalam, which is her mother tongue. Her collection of poems in English includes: *Summer in Calcutta*(1965), *The Descendants*(1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*(1973), *Strange Time*(1977), and *Collected Poems*(1984), together with poetry she also wrote few novels and several volumes of short-stories in English. She is a major name in terms of "Confessional Poets" as she writes in the spur of the moment "of everything perceived, and known and loved". Her poetry is in the nature of "psychic striptease". She is a poet of love and lust, love either fulfilled or rejected and lust which often accompanies love. Her 'Confessionalism' makes her an exception in Indian context. She has always been compared to the American poetess Sylvia Plath. The conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented universe emerges as a major theme in our poetry.

The most obvious or rather the most interesting feature of Kamala Das's poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex, referring nonchalantly to 'the mask of sweat between the breasts', 'the warm shock of menstrual blood,' and even 'my pubis'. But a closer reading proves that this is not just a cheap exercise in stretching 'my two-dimensional/ Nudity on sheets of weeklies,' nor a wanton display of 'thighs and sighs', nor yet merely a case of 'from bed to verse', expressing her 'endless female hungers', 'the muted whisper at the core of womanhood'. She may 'flaunt... A grand, flamboyant lust', but in her heart of hearts she remains the eternal Eve proudly celebrating her essential femininity. If she lets her 'mind striptease' and finds that 'I must extrude/ Autobiography,' those are only attempts to understand and articulate 'what I was and by learning, to

learn to grow.

The persona's experience, according to Kamala Das herself (as explained in her autobiography, *My Story*) evidently derives from a traumatic frustration in love, and marriage, compelling the victim to 'run from one/ Gossamer love to another,' sadly realizing that 'Love became a swivel-door / When one went out, another came in'. The result is confessional poetry obsessively mulling over love, sex and the 'body's wisdom', Several faces of Eve are exhibited here-woman as sweetheart, flirt, wife, woman of the world, mother, middle-aged matron-and above all, woman as an untiring seeker of the nature of the psychological processes behind both femininity and masculinity. Love too appears in several roles such as a 'skin-communicated thing', an overpowering force, an escape, a longing and a hunger resulting in satiety, Kamala Das's generally sex-dominated poetry has' unfortunately obscured her few but sensitive poem~ which evoke childhood memories of the ancestral home in Kerala.

Many of Kamala Das's love poems have a Browningsque dramatic quality. Like Browning's women, her persona too sees herself in different situations against a concrete background, reacting to 'incidents in the development of the soul'. The intensity of her utterance sometimes results in a lack of verbal discipline, and her constant harping upon sex cannot escape the law of diminishing aesthetic returns. She has her moments of romantic claptrap and sentimentality also (e.g., 'O Krishna, -I am melting, melting, melting'), but the total impression Kamala Das's poetry produces is one of a bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within.

The tone of her poetry is distinctively feminine. She is very fond of re-iteration and splitting of words to suit her ends. The impression of her poetry is one of bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within her. But without any doubt her bold and honest voice has re-energized Indian writing in English. While there are more than thirty modern women poets with more than one collection each to their credit, the work of few of them possesses the individuality, simplicity and power of Kamala Das's verse.

In her poetry named "An Introduction" taken from the collection of her poetry named *Summer in Calcutta (1965)*, she says

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.
Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone.

(An Introduction)

In the above lines, she expresses her frustration and describes her identity and her likeness. She finds English to be the best suited medium of expression. She says that people criticize her of writing in English, she defends herself by saying that she should be left at her own discretion and conscious to decide on which language to speak and write.

Das is quite rebellious in her writings. It aptly describes poets

search for cultural, linguistic as well as sexual identity in a post-colonial reality which is actually oppressive and overbearing, she provides the reader with the 'anatomy' of her mind. She brings in the issue of politics of language, the poet moves on to the subject of sexual politics in a patriarchal society and talks about her puzzling adolescence and the pain of growing up in spite of being born in a multicultural, multilingual and a superfluous inclusive society.

The third writer about whom I wish to talk about is Ruskin Bond, popular as a man divided between two canons. Ruskin Bond has published a large number of collections of short stories, some of them are: *Neighbour's Wife and Other Stories* (1966); *My First love and Other Stories* (1968); *The Maneater of Manjari* (1972) and *The Girl From Copenhagen* (1977). He wrote an autobiographical first novel, *The Room on the Roof* (1956), which is an evocative study of an observant Eurasian boy's reaction to the colorful Indian scene. His later novels also include *An Axe for the Rani* (1972) and *Love is a Sad Story* (1975). The Anglo-Indian writer has also written a large number of books for children. He being a European always recognized himself more as an Indian. The reason behind this might be his growing years which he spent in India and the sheer curiosity to know about a different culture. He was a frustrated child and always yearned for freedom and personal identity. He even spent his few years in England in order to establish himself in his fatherland but unfortunately he neither received spiritual nor mental satisfaction. He again came back to India and established his paradise in the mountains of Massourie. English was his medium of expression together with his mother tongue. He had a trans-normative family, he became extremely lonely after the death of his father. He yearned for freedom and companionship among his few very friendly and kind Indian friends.

His favorite subjects are pets, animals and a variety of have-nots, including waifs, orphans, abnormal children, restless adolescents and frustrated old men, whom he portrays with genuine compassion. His exercises in the supernatural like 'Never shoot a Monkey' and 'Haunted Bungalow' are adequate, though by no means brilliant. Bond is at his best in evoking a mood of nostalgia for the vanished sights and scenes of boyhood, of the pathos of the inexorable march of Time, as in 'The Meeting Pool', 'I can't climb Trees Any More' and 'My Father's Trees'. In most of his stories, the middle-aged narrator visits a scene of his boyhood and feels the impact of the change both in the setting and his own self. Another special feature of his writing's is that of his acute responsiveness to nature, the 'great affinity between trees and men'. It is not simply a matter of nature description as a narrative technique, but a genuine feeling for the natural world which has somewhat of a 'Wordsworthian' quality about it. Unfortunately, Bond has not always written in this vein and has his own share of slick 'magazine stories' as well. In one of the interviews, when Ruskin Bond was asked about his categorical Indianness, he explains this fact by saying that it is all because I am an Indian. My heart is here. I had spent my childhood here. India is my real home. I may have been reincarnated here; I may have been a Dukhi before being born in an English family. I belong to the grass, to the trees, to the hills here. After an extensive reading of writers like E. M. Foster, V. S. Naipaul, L. H. Mayers, Rudyard Kipling and John Master, the major problem with them is that they tried to discover India through the colored spectacles of a foreigner; they could not accept as it was. But Ruskin Bond's

case is different from all these writers. As Mulk Raj Anand has written in response to the suggestion of P. K. Singh's critiques about Bond's evocative writings:

"It is possible that as you are the youngest of the British writers, and have matured after India became free, you have no sense of superiority over the Indians around you, so your novels and stories seem to have emerged from within Indian homes. And your heart is in the mountains with your inborn love for nature... you have gone to the source of Ganga, you have lived in cottages without pretensions of hippies... in fact you have become a Garhwali, not one of those whom the Imperial Army preferred for their talent of wielding the Khukhri... but as a spiritual descendent of the poet painter of the 18th century".

Ruskin Bond's acceptance of India is unprecedented, because not only British, but some Indian writers also have written under British spell hence losing their ethnic and regional uniqueness and individuality in the quest of imitating the West for mere hollow recognitions.

Indian English writing is mainly enriched by those who are either educated or settled abroad. Very few of them like Ruskin Bond are working far away from the urban centers, chiefly coming from metropolitan backgrounds. This problem needs to be viewed in wider perspective taking into account the socio-economic scene, the hegemonic status which western thought control, religious attitudes that blurs the vision and above all writer's own interest in the depiction. Born as an English man during British regime in India, Ruskin Bond was brought up in changing times as a boy of divided loyalties. Though his roots were in England he was grafted in Indian soil and nurtured by Indian air and water. By the time of his teens India became free and British Raj returned to England leaving behind a race of split loyalties. Through most of English and Anglo-Indian families returned to U.K., many of these families chose to remain in India. Ruskin Bond and his mother's family were among such 'Whites' settled in the peaceful town Dehra. When others were passing through post-colonial trauma of displacement, of loss of country, friends and parents, of insecurity and of finance, for Bond it was only a trauma of a loss of identity. He tried to search his roots in India; because the question of filial relationship was as glaring to him as to others. But he could find nothing common with other English people except pigmentation. As he grew out of his teens, he began to love this country and the simplistic attitude of people.

He started his new journey on the foreign soil. But soon after his short stay at New Jersey, he started feeling nostalgic and India began to haunt him. It was all that he had known and loved so far. Bond longed for the 'languid easygoing mango scented air' of small towns and villages. It was that warm and familiar touch of the people of India that he missed the most. New Jersey became a sort of real island of his life devoid of friends and familiarities. So he returned to his 'home', to 'the sensuous welcoming arms of the land' he had left. This proved to serve as a contrast to the East and the West which is quite evident in his writings and have been extensively talked about in his autobiography in order to explain the difference between the two poles of diametrically opposite in terms of social and cultural ethos.

The problem of split nationality was resolved forever by getting a firm foothold in India, never to waver again. His vision of India for him gets very clear. As far as Bond's personality is concerned, he himself resembles the calm and poised attitude of a Himalayan saint who for the last fifty

years has been scribbling Indian stories because he loves this soil. The dilemma of 'had we done this, had we got that' does not gnaw his consciousness. Bond who believes that art lies in concealing the art, knows that the power of pen is honest and gifted hands is greater than the grave. Therefore his fiction is not only rich in exterior embellishment of narration, but has the sublimity of vision too. All these attributes of his writings contribute to a large extent towards the characteristic 'Indianness' and the specific Indian English which does not aim to please the readers of the proud West. The essence of his art lies in his paining words to the reader:

"May you have the wisdom to be simple and the humor to be happy".

The last writer about whom I will be discussing in this sequence is A. K. Ramanujan, he is a trilingual writer and a man of diasporic sensibility. He was a poet, translator and an academician. He has also been a cultural ambassador of India who popularized many Indian texts in the western world. His popular collections of poetry in English are *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), and *Second Sight* (1986). His translations are *Fifteen Tamil Poets* (1965), *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *Speaking of Siva* (1972), *Samskara* (1976). His first volume *The Striders* also won a Poetry Book Society recommendation. Ramanujan is a poet of the intellect and follows the Imagist tradition of Ezra Pound. In R. Parthasarathy's words: His Indian experience repeatedly features in his verses, and is often precisely recreated in their original settings. But his American experience seems less frequently to impinge his verse or, for that matter, round off anomalies in his obviously Hindu outlook. India and America tend to exist separately, and come together, however, only at a time of personal crisis explored, for instance, in 'still Another View of Grace'.

He is a skilled poet and remains matchless in Indian English poetry. It is rooted in a specific culture and he is gifted with the art of translating the experience of one culture into another. He created a fine blend of imagism and Indian sensibility in his poetry. His Tamil culture and Indianness always has an imprint on his writing together with his diasporic sensibility but instead of choosing to return to his motherland he chose to stay back and continue to teach Dravidian Linguistics at the University of Chicago.

Ramanujan has said, 'English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my "outer" forms – like linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience, together with my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classic and Folklore give me my substance, my "inner" forms, images, symbols'. His poetry thus draws in sustenance from his intense awareness of his racial burden, his Hindu heritage. 'I must seek and will find/ My particular hell in my Hindu mind' is his motto. This awareness does not, however, lead to blind acceptance, for the poet is equally alive to both the strength and the deficiencies of his racial ethos. He admires its vision of unity of all life as in 'Christmas', which stresses the impossibility of knowing 'leaf from parrot/ Or branch from root/ Nor... that tree/ From you or me'; and he notes its great absorbing power by picturing a typical joint family in 'Small-scale Reflection on a Great House'. At the same time, he does not fail to notice its inability to satisfy completely the modern mind, which cannot reconcile itself easily to the presence of elemental evil in life (e.g. 'The Hindoo : he reads his *Gita* and is calm at all events'). He pillories the cowardice that may

pass for gentleness (e.g. 'The Hindoo : he doesn't Hurt a Fly or spider either') and the patient equanimity which may degenerate into sheer heartlessness (e.g. 'The Hindoo : The Only Risk'). He deprecates its uncritical acceptance of tradition and its neglect of the individual, as when he describes how the ancient Tamil poets praised the river in flood and 'The new poets still quoted/ The old poets, but no one spoke / In verse / Of the pregnant woman/ drowned'.

In his writings, Ramanujan tries to juxtapose ironically the ancient Hindu ethos with the situation of the modern Hindu as in 'Some Indian uses of History on a Rainy Day' and contrasts the Hindu and Western world-views as in 'Christmas'.

The 'ancient hands' at the poet's 'throat' include the ancestors of his persona too. While the Tamil epigraph to *Relations* states that 'living/ Among relations/ Binds the feet' Ramanujan's persona finds his entire anatomy 'bred in an ancestor's bone', His self-portrait is that 'of a stranger/ Date unknown/ Often signed in a corner/ By my father'. 'Ancestral crocodiles and tortoises' haunt his imagination. This makes for a poetry in which memory plays a vigorous, creative role. It is not 'emotion recollected in tranquility' but recollection emotionalized in un-tranquil moments that is the driving force behind much of Ramanujan's poetry. Time and again, 'a hood/ Of memory like a coil on a heath' unfolds itself in his mind. This memory is fruitfully creative when it attempts an almost total recall of sensuous childhood impressions of fear, sorrow or death as in 'Snakes', 'Breaded Fish' and 'The Opposable thumb'; and also when recollection takes on an ironic flavor as a childhood impression recalled years later and properly understood from the vantage ground of adulthood suddenly yields a surprisingly new significance (e.g. 'History').

When it comes to Ramanujan's preoccupation with motifs of ancestral heritage and memory, his few love poems have not received the attention they deserve. His attempt to square 'the ancient circle/ of you and me' is fascinating in its varying moods. His lover complains that he cannot recall the face and the words of his absent beloved, though his memory is cluttered up with all kinds of footling details. 'Love Poem for a Wife!' is a revealing comment on how an unshared childhood separates a devoted couple and 'Still Life' is a celebration of love as an abiding presence. These love poems are remarkable for their quite but deep emotion, their fineness of perception and their treatment of the unusual in one of the most basic human experiences.

In poetic technique, of all his contemporaries, Ramanujan appears to have the surest touch, for he never lapses into romantic cliché. His unflinching sense of rhythm gives a fitting answer to those who hold that complete inwardness with language is possible only to a poet writing in his mother tongue. Though he writes in open forms, his verse is extremely tightly constructed. He can also surprise us with a startlingly apt adjective as in 'the naked parting of her hair' or blend image and word music perfectly as when he describes snakes as 'writing a sibilant alphabet of panic/ On my floor'.

While his technical accomplishment is indisputable and his thematic strategy exactly the right one for a poet in his situation, one is not so sure that during the dozen years and more that he has been writing, Ramanujan has fully exploited the opportunities his material offers him. His articulation of the Hindu ethos has so far produced poetry of the periphery and not the center of the Hindu experience of course with few

exceptions. His poetry of memory gives us much that is of human interest but remains, on the whole, severely restricted to the social plane of experience alone, seldom attempting higher or more subtle evocations; and the love poems are only a small handful. A later poem like 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' even reveals a curious uncertainty in his reaction to Hinduism. Perhaps Ramanujan has yet to come fully to terms with his heritage and is still feeling his way. Meanwhile, he has effectively demonstrated to his contemporaries the supreme importance of having roots and has also shown glimpses of the vitality that the work of a poet acquires when he succeeds even partially in his attempts. Hence he should be appreciated for his exceptional contribution towards Indian English Literature.

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