

Alienation and Cultural Death in Parthasarthy's "Homecoming"

Aalia Khan

Research Scholar

Univ. Dept. of English

T. M. Bhagalpur University

Bhagalpur

Abstract

R. Parthasarthy's "Homecoming" the third in the trio of *Rough Passage*, a comprehensive autobiographical poem, encompasses the enigma of alienation, cultural death and rootlessness. "Homecoming", the third section of *Rough Passage* (1977) is a sequence of seven poems, as anthologized by Prasad and Singh and probe into the phenomenon called alienation, its causes, outcome and implications. This study decodes Parthasarthy's frantic attempts to realign with his roots. It analyses his disillusioned self, the culture-excavator that Parthasarthy becomes and his realization that indigenous Indian culture needs little western props to inspire his poetic crafty. All these hypotheses are based on the seven parts of "Homecoming". Parthasarthy's alienation is cultural estrangement that is the sense of removal from established values in society. He fears it may lead to cultural death if proper initiatives for cultural restoration are not taken. This he tries to do through his own poetic endeavour inspired by indigenous culture.

Key words: Alienation, Cultural Death, Exile, Rootlessness, Homecoming

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"All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination and independence has not solved this problem."

Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffins

The Post-Colonial Studies Reader

“Introduction”(2)

RajagopalaParthasarthy (b.1934) is an accomplished Modern Indian Poet. Parthasarthy is noted as an Indian poet writing in English for his *Rough Passage* in the exile-trial-homecoming structure patterned on his personal experience. The structure and poetic rhythm of Parthasarthy's *Rough Passage* is akin to G.M.Hopkin's definition of poetic stages-in-scape, in-stress and naked-shock.

Parthasarthy pursued his education at the University of Bombay and later at the University of Leeds. During his school days, and when at university, he had developed an intense infatuation with England and English Literature. He aspired to make England his home in which his study of English language and literature would help him but he was soon disillusioned. Parthasarthy was disenchanted with England and as a result he began to discover himself and his identity. Being a Tamil Brahmin by ethnicity he was well conditioned in his own language and culture. Despite being well read in English language and literature, totally accepting a foreign tongue just on the basis of being academically qualified in the language did not ultimately turn out to be a practicable idea for him. His love for English literature and idea of making England his future home were all based on a youthful, intellectual infatuation. He was so finely rooted in his native language and culture that even on “whoring after english gods” for forty years his native land, culture and language pulled him back both because of their own resilience and Parthasarthy's acceptance of their superiority and originality.

The poems of Parthasarthy are a byproduct of a crisis springing out of oscillation between his acquired-self and original Tamil roots. Parthasarthy's notable work *Rough Passage* published in 1977 is an assortment of poems in which each poem as a unit forms a continuum of the entire text. It is the culmination of twenty years of poetic creation and revision. The outcome of this meticulous poetic experimentation is the “Exile”-“Trial”-

“Homecoming” framework of the entire text of *Rough Passage*. The poems of this series appeared in revised drafts, and often with various changes articulating images of cultural context as well as universal implications.

“Homecoming” the third in the trio of his poetic framework expresses Parthasarthy’s sensibilities of alienation and cultural death. Prasad and Singh in *Indian Poetry in English* observe that:

“Homecoming” takes up the theme of language, culture and roots more directly. The central theme is poet’s linguistic dilemma. His task is to acclimatize English language to an indigenous (Tamil) tradition (109)

Alienation is a sense of social isolation and cultural estrangement brought out by lack of consonance between individual expectations and the existing social order. The term alienation has also acquired the connotations of social apathy, incapacity to feel, and jadedness as defined by M.H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Globalization, post-colonialism and modernization are some of the major factors leading to alienation.

Often, the major factors leading to alienation are extrinsic. At times alienation is even required as refuge from ‘unreal cities’, men who are ‘stony rubbish’ and ‘the world that is too much with us’. Alienation victimizes the psyche and morality of its prey. Mobility, education, brain drain and resultant diaspora often lead to alienation. As enumerated by Salman Rushdie alienation may be caused on three accounts, the “triple disruption.” Almost all these factors have been expressed as poetic feelings because of alienating impact on Rajagopal Parthasarthy (b. 1934), the widely acclaimed poet and anthologist. Parthasarthy’s alienation is cultural estrangement- “the sense of removal from established values in society” which may, he fears lead to cultural death if proper cultural restoration initiatives are not taken.

Parthasarthy along with Adil Jussawalla, as Modern Indian Poets, have expressed their feelings of alienation and disappointment in England in the opinion of Bruce King. After

having experienced a culture shock and alienation Parthasarthy returned to his roots only to face death, the death of his very own, pristine and pure, original and balmy Tamil language and culture:

My tongue in English chains
I returned after a generation to you
I am at the end
 “Homecoming” (73)

R. Parthasarthy's ***Rough Passage***, the longest autobiographical poem in Indian English Literature emulates classic cases of alienation, cultural death and loss of rootedness. To Parthasarthy realization comes out but too late:

He had spent his youth whoring
After the English gods.

Under Another Sky (1966)

Seen in exile-trial-homecoming framework ***Rough Passage*** depicts images of universal implication. Alienation repels Parthasarthy back to his roots after having stripped him off the fascination for the English language, culture and society. The poet based on his bitter experiences directs us-

Scrape the bottom of your past
Ransack the cupboard
for skeleton of your Brahmin childhood. (74)

“Homecoming”, the third section of *Rough Passage* (1977) is a sequence of poems that offers much scope for scholars to probe into the phenomenon called alienation, its causes, outcomes and implications. This study shall be based on the seven parts of “Homecoming” as published in *Indian Poetry in English* by Prasad and Singh.

In the first part the poet laments bitterly when he finds his mother tongue Tamil corrupted and vulgarized by English. This makes him realize that like his “Exile and Trial” his “Homecoming” too is futile as his return after realization could not achieve the object of

finding his own root that is Tamil language and culture in its pristine and agile form. Parthasarthy is frustrated into calling his roots as his “Dravidic tether”, the “hunger for” which goes “unassuaged” leaving him faltering and stumbling. Now Parthasarthy finds his language devoid of vitality and prefers to call it a “tired language wrenched from its sleep in the Kural”. The poet uses an appropriate metaphor of “reel down” to suggest the actual turning of reel on which the film moves in “plush corridors”. The poet suggests that the classical Tamil has now become History, and is a thing of past and is at best celebrated and preserved in celluloid films. The original resilient Tamil language and culture is no longer a living present but a thing of a past lulled into sleep in ancient texts like Thiruvalluvar’s *Thirukural*. Parthasarthy is full of guilt and remorse because of this irreparable loss. He accuses himself too as he was busy “whoring after English gods”. The first part of the poem is therefore drenched with a sense of great loss.

In the second part the poet talks about the geographical and political space that is Tamil Nadu which always reminds him of the great language and culture for which he uses the metaphor “the bull Nammalvar” which was rigorous and resilient but is now left as “an unrecognizable carcass”. The almost dead Tamil language and culture is now no more inspiring and a reason to be proud of. It is visited by the “fleas of Kodambakkam.” The situation is hopeless and the poet laments:

there is little you can do about it,
except throw up your hands.
How long can foreign poets
provide the staple of your lines? (74)

However, bleak and hoary the situation may be after delving deep in the sense of frustration the poet tries to figure out the reason behind this vulgarization and corruption. The reason behind is to feed on “foreign poets” for “the staple of your lines”. As a solution to the problem Parthasarthy suggests out of his poetic vision and experience of life that

turning inward could restore some lost heritage and quench his sense of alienation and cultural death. As a visionary poet he suggests:

Scrape the bottom of your past.
Ransack the cupboard
For skeleton of your Brahmin childhood
(the nights with father droning
The Four thousand as sleep
Pinched your thigh blue) (74)

As a solution to cultural death the poet acquiesces that going back to ones root and discharging the responsibility to cleanse the ethnic language of its dross is a way out to mitigate rootlessness causing alienation and cultural death. As a man with immense creative imagination the poet hopes to:

strike out a line for yourself
from the iron of life's ordinariness. (74)

The second part of the poem is a sense of realization of ones roots which gradually sets in the psyche of the poet. His creative imagination also explores the possibility of retrieving the otherwise lost cultural and linguistic heritage. The poet in this part becomes hortative in style. In the exercise of poetic innovation Parthasarthy deftly crafts original symbols like "the bull of Nammalvar" and "the fleas of Kodambakkam". The most striking strain of this part of the poem is that from a total sense of loss there is a return to hope and expectation after what Parthasarthy thinks:

There is little you can do about it,
except throw up your hands. (74)

Parthasarthy concludes the second part with a hope that on revisiting once own rich cultural heritage by scraping "the bottom of your past" and ransacking "the cupboard for skeleton" one may redeem cultural loss. As a silver lining behind the cloud Parthasarthy concludes:

you may then
perhaps, strike out a line for
yourself
from the iron of life's ordinaries. (74)

The use of verbs in the second part of the poem are remarkable, some of which are- “to be conscious”, “took by horns”, “little you can do”, “turn inward”, “scrape”, “ransack”, “strike out alive”. All these verbs contain aggression and essence if urgency in doing what is required to beat down alienation and redeem cultural death.

The third part of the poem uses the technique of memory in getting back to the roots and reliving the past. The hope which had been garnered in the second part of the poem is actualized through a family re-union at Tiruchanur. In the modern life joint families were unheard of and the family had not come together since years. The poet creates astonishingly beautiful poetic expressions:

the dust of unlettered years
Clouding instant recognition (74)

The imagery of native family and its members drawing together with the bonhomie of kinship is in sharp contrast to the mood and poetic tone set in the second part of the “Homecoming”. This shows the fragmented structure of the poem which is a hallmark of modernism. What binds together the seven parts of the poem is not the poetic flow and structural unity but a sense of reasoning that the roots should be revisited after realization in the previous part of the poem.

The culinary culture of a traditional Tamil family is beautifully expressed in a crisp three-line stanza:

of the choultry, familiar coconuts
out of the fire

of rice-and-pickle afternoons.(75)

Sundari's childhood is the most beautiful culmination of the technique of memory in the poem. As a child Sundari had "squirreled" up and down a village tamarind tree but is now herself surrounded by three daughters gyrating around Sundari forty years later. The imagery of heavenly bodies drawn from the solar system settles a mood of solace and salvation when there is an attempt of reconnecting with the roots.

In part four of the poem, Parthasarthy is perhaps at his poetic best. He is inspired by the memory of childhood ignited by the family get-together since March 1959. In a strikingly original poetic diction and brilliant choice of adjectives and verbs, the poet re-lives the past days of a Nanjangud- "sepia landscape", "sort of celluloid", "smug childhood".

It is ironical that in his infatuation for the English language and culture, Parthasarthy had missed out on his roots of culture, he is full of lamentation that he has returned to it but his "Homecoming" is at the tethered end. The Vaiki river which was the lifeline of the landscape is ignored like a rotten carcass or a sewer. In its charm the river had been beholden by emperors and poets. Kingfishers and egrets which visited the river have now left forever divesting Vaiki of its charm. Once again by the end of the fifth part of the poem, the poet returns to somber mood whereas, the fifth part has started with childhood games. It is quick to point out man cleaning "hisarse" on temple steps beside Vaiki. While the bells of the temple previously inspired devotion and incantation of religious verses, pregnant with cultural practices. It now creates a bleak vision in the poet's mind. This point is the nadir of cultural death in the poet's conception. He feels starkly alienated with his own culture and homeland. Parthasarthy's *Homecoming* is therefore, not as fulfilling as he had aspired it to be.

The sixth part of the poem is very rich in imagery of a disturbed mental psyche. The poet talks of "hawks" circumscribing vision "in ripples". The "sky" bending "in adoration",

“rocks dream(ing) in stone” along the “many-clawed sea” all go on to create a vivid imagery of the landscape. Replete in the temporal and spatial description of the roots of Parthasarthy, the sixth part of the poem excels in creative and poetic imagination. Water gossiping idly and prodding “the stone-carrion” all go on to make an exquisite imagery. There is a deep imprint of Modern English poets like W.B. Yeats on the poetic craft of Parthasarthy:

All around, among the casuarina groves,
Slow, but inexorable,
trundles the elephant of history.(76)

Phrases like “the elephant of history” and verbs like “trundles” are very reminiscent of Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming*. As a part of *Rough Passage* which was first published in 1977 the six parts of the poem “Homecoming” clearly seem to be influenced by Yeats’ *Second Coming*, its phraseology, art of creating poetic imagery and other modernist modes as it was written in 1919 and first published in *The Dial* in 1920.

Prasad and Singh rightly observe that the diction of Parthasarthy is:

...example of the poet’s cogent craftsmanship, his austerity of
style, his sculptor like quality to make finished marble image (110)

The seventh and the last part of “Homecoming” as published in Prasad and Singh’s anthology is an artistic exercise in homecoming with one’s own self. The poet Parthasarthy and the uprooted, alienated man grapples with the possibility of atoning himself with his culture, language and heritage:

This afternoon I dusted my table.
Arranged everything in order
in a desperate attempt to get
hold of myself. (76)

Making an assessment of his achievements and losses, the poet tries to come to terms with his own self and find peace. Dusting of table, glass of beer, lighting a cigarette and following its smoke like a private tour are all serious attempts to beat down alienation and

to come to terms with the facts of life and draw peace. It acts as an effort by the poet to recapitulate his youth and youthful ambitions and dreams against the backdrop of the feelings of alienation and loneliness he underwent during the period of his exile.

The poetic endeavour of Parthasarthy actually amounts to be a voyage of the divided inner self of the poet with the native culture, which offers a relief to the tumultuous dilemma going on between his intellectual mind and rustic heart. It however failed to culminate into a mitigated resolution as the poet desired for because even when the poet sought pleasure in being rooted back to his native Tamil culture, his intellectually enlightened-self prevented him to surrender completely to the now flawed Tamil language and culture. Parthasarthy was bound to accept the irony of his intellectual awareness, dual personality and twin inheritance of two languages and cultures.

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