

THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE: EXPERIENCES ARTICULATED BY A FEW INDIAN CONFESSIONAL POETS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the poems of three different poets, a male and two women, are taken for study. R.Parthasarathy's "Rough Passage" (1980), Kamala Das' "An Introduction" (1965) and Sujata Bhatt's "Search for My Tongue" (1988) and "A Different History" (1988) are chosen to study the different attitudes and agonies expressed by the poets in having to use a foreign language for creative expression. These poets have expressed their anguish and assertiveness in their stance towards using a foreign language.

KEY WORDS: Postcolonial, Confessional Poets, Language

Most of the poets use their personal experience as subject matter for their poems but it is only the confessional poets that are audacious to lay emphasis on 'self' using the personal 'I'. Confessional poets confess their experienced pain, anguish, emotion, love, freedom or anything intimate that induced them to write. The 'I' of the poems refer to the poets themselves, who are least worried about the criticism that might emerge later and are hardly bothered about exposing themselves. Sometimes their personal becomes political and stands strong for contentious issues.

This paper aims at making a comparative study of the poems that bring out the poets selected for study being conscious of the medium of language that they use for their writing. It brings out the pain and humiliation or perhaps the guilt that the writers experience in having to use English – the colonizer's language – to express themselves. The fact that they would have to sideline their regional language in order to adopt English language for creative expression cause an embarrassment in them that is highly disturbing. It is sometimes with guilt and sometimes with bold assertion that they defend themselves.

In this paper, the poems of three different poets, a male and two women, are taken for study. R.Parthasarathy's "Rough Passage" (1980), Kamala Das' "An Introduction" (1965) and Sujata Bhatt's "Search for My Tongue" (1988) and "A Different History" (1988) are chosen to study the different attitudes and agonies expressed by the poets in having to use a foreign language for creative expression. These poets have expressed their anguish and assertiveness in their stance towards using a foreign language. They, despite being bilingual poets, write more in English, since they are comfortable in it. A look back at history reveals that English has been enforced upon us Indians, and it is an inevitable fact that Indians, especially, those belonging to the affluent section of the society, or some being the descendants of settlers, or those holding positions of power, or the families of the metropolitan intellectuals, or the so-called privileged who were able to take up English as their first language, were proud of being able to use English for various purposes. It in fact has become a status symbol, approved by many and opposed by some.

There were even a creamy layer of people who were in the danger of completely losing their mother-tongue and through that also their identity. This happened not only with language but with culture also. These writers who talk about their ambiguous relationship with their regional language - their mother tongue - also reveal their bewilderment relating to culture and problems of identity

R.Parthasarathy in his first poem "Exile" included in "*Rough Passage*" (1980) expresses his attraction for English, and at the same time confesses his feeling of exile. The poem is in a contemplative mood where he contemplates about growing up through experience. He feels that at the age of 30, one reaches a stage where one would not trust his own image and that a man possesses enough maturity to see oneself from a distance. The poem expresses a deep sense of pensiveness where the poet even broods upon the aspect of language. He suggests that his love for English is like the infatuation a man has for a woman, and he feels that it is not healthy after all, since extreme infatuation might only impede the expansion of one's faculties. Parthasarathy expresses his disillusionment with English and suggests that his love for it was not love after all but only an infatuation that had enchanted him. We see here that although R.Parthasarathy loves English and is highly attracted towards it, it is with guilt that he adopts the language. Added to it he feels himself alienated from both the cultures and at one stage even is disillusioned with English.

Sujata Bhatt's two poems "Search for my Tongue" and "A Different History," like Parthasarathy's poems, explore the problems of identity and colonialism, which ultimately centre upon language. In "Search for my Tongue," which is a bilingual poem, Bhatt deals with the dilemma of people involved with two different cultures and languages. The conflict within the individual in having to tackle two different identities and two different languages – one close to the heart - the mother tongue (Gujarati) and the other, the necessary one – the alien tongue (English) is portrayed with a feeling of annoyance. She is also petrified of losing the mother tongue which adds to her unhappiness. Whatever she writes, Bhatt is unable to abandon her being conscious of the language she uses. She is all the time concerned with the language of writing and it is through this she reconciles to the aspect of being a bi-linguist.

In the poem, "A Different History," she talks of the reception given to a foreign language in a colonized country. Though she incepts the poem with the pressure the Indians face in having to conform to certain ways of living, she concludes the poem by zeroing in on the merits of a language. She states that all languages are good and worthy of learning. She believes that though English is the colonizer's language that has a long history of bloodshed and cruelty to it, it has not affected the colonial countries' usage of it. In fact, the younger generations actually love the Oppressor's language and that the enmity for the oppressor has not extended to his language. Sujata Bhatt believes that all languages are innately good and that they never advocate violence against any people. By such justifications and indirect explanations for using English, it could be seen that Bhatt, though guilty of almost being on the verge of losing her mother-tongue, also asserts her predicament of having to use English. She, at the same time emphasizes the triumph of her regional language over the alien tongue.

If Parthasarathy wallowed in his "schizophrenic distress" (Dasgupta, n.pag.) because of two different languages and cultures, and Sujata Bhatt in uncertainty and hesitation, Kamala Das asserts her usage of English in a more aggressive and self confident way. She says that English – her medium of expression is a sincere and spontaneous one that would in no way interfere with her Indianness or nativism. She is angry at her critics, friends and relatives who advise her on using her mother tongue. She confesses that she is more at ease in it than in Malayalam and opines that English to her is "as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions" (68). It could thus be seen, to put in Bruce King's words that

English is no longer the language of colonial rulers; it is a language of modern India in which words and expressions have recognized national rather than imported significances and

references, attending to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling (qtd. in Dasgupta, n. pag.).

Thus it could be concluded that the three poets, possessing three different regional languages - Parthasarathy, Tamil, Sujata Bhatt, Gujarati and Kamala Das, Malayalam - through their poetry, express their agony, distress and despair, uncertainty and hesitation in having to use English but at the same time express the inevitability of it. They have voiced out the dilemma that innumerable Indians, who are in one way or the other associated with English, have felt. By expressing their anguish, and confessing their ambiguous feelings towards two languages that they are associated with, they have not only spoken for themselves and let out their miseries, but have also represented many other Indians' suffering from similar plights. By using the Confessional mode of poetry, they with ease have brought out how the alien tongue has become Indianized and have been assimilated by people. They, with straightforwardness and simplicity show, so as to put in Aizaz Ahmad's words:

English is simply one of India's own languages now, and what is at issue at present is not the possibility of its ejection but the mode of its assimilation into our social fabric, and the manner in which this language, like any substantial structure of linguistic difference, is used in the processes of class formation and social privilege, here and now (qtd. in Dasgupta, n. pag.).

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