

Crisis of Identity and Quest of Root in the Poetry of R. Parthasarathy: A Critical Reappraisal from Postcolonial Perspective

Souparna Roy

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Chitta Mahato Memorial College, Purulia, West Bengal

Abstract

Parthasarathy's poetry primarily deals with the crisis of identity ensuing from expatriation. The poet's personal feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction and bitter experiences of racial discriminations during the years he spent in England occupy a considerable portion of his work. He also portrays how such feelings make him cast retrospective glance at his past and origin. Here the poetry of another South Indian poet A. K. Ramanujan proved handy for him as it provided him with a model of how to use the past creatively, particularly the complex memories of the nuanced pattern of South Indian familial relationships, in order to emote a native sensibility in alien language. As the very title of Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* clearly indicates, the metaphor of journey is crucial to the understanding of the entire book. The journey is here as much physical as it is internal, charting the constant changes and gradual evolutions in the poet's psychological states paralleling the shifts in the physical locale, as he travels from home to foreign lands and finally back home and in different cities of his homeland. The journey is finally directed towards the exploration of the identity of the poetic self disgruntled with a long-drawn phase of detrimental infatuation with a foreign culture. This zest for genuine self-representation, which is the ultimate object of this self-exploratory inward march, is part of what Ellek Boehmer calls the necessity for 'cultural self-definition' (Boehmer 176) and 'demands for political self-determination with a quest for cultural and geographic authenticity' (Boehmer 178) in the wake of independence of the erstwhile colonies. The cultural and linguistic dilemma, resulting in a kind of crisis of identity of the former colonial subject bifurcated with bicultural upbringing, is finally resolved as the poet re-roots himself within his native cultural tradition which was lying submerged, almost obliterated, under the choking impact of the coloniser's culture. The decolonised creative impetus attempts to overhaul the master's language to accommodate a native sensibility, ransacking the El Dorado of native tradition and its rich cultural and linguistic heritage through a process of 'cultural revivalism' (Boehmer 179), in order to forge an identity essentially embedded in both familial and racial past predating the colonial encounter.

Keywords: bicultural, decolonised, dilemma, identity, independence, language

Parthasarathy's poetry is an exploration of the identity crisis consequent upon expatriation. He expresses his feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction during his stay in England and also portrays how such feelings make him look back to his past and origin. Although he began his literary career by writing such short love lyrics as 'Late Lovers', 'Epitaph', 'Let's be strangers, Always', 'Lovers' etc. which were published in such diverse journals as *The Quest*, *Miscellany*, *The Literary Half Yearly* etc., he ultimately decided upon writing a longer poem consisting of a sequence of shorter poems connected through certain underlying themes, motifs and imagery recurring like insistent refrain across the entire body of the work. The title of this longer poem is *Rough Passage*. It was published in 1977. It consists of three parts--'Exile', 'Trial' and 'Homecoming'. 'Exile' was written between 1963 and 1967--the period of time the poet was in England. The poems in 'Trial' were added later on. They were written between 1961 and 1974. 'Homecoming' was written since 1971, dealing with the poet's experience of stay in Madras where he worked as the regional editor of the Oxford University Press.

The conceptual frameworks of many poems in *Rough Passage* bear distinct influence of A. K. Ramanujan who provided Parthasarathy with a model of how to make poetic use of the past, particularly the complex memories of the nuanced pattern of South Indian familial relationships, with a view to evoking Tamil cultural milieu in English language. Ramanujan with his poems on past experiences and memories of family and forefathers proved handy for him to creatively manage the problems of biculturalism, taking the vantage point of an exile. The plight of being posited between two different cultures, neither of which being wholly embraceable or outright disposable, caused the crisis of identity in the poet. His predicament precisely lies in the conflict of opting for either of the two languages and cultures exclusively--one which he can never assimilate and absorb despite staying deeply infatuated with the same for a quite considerable period of time and the other bequeathed ancestrally to him but found utterly degenerated. However, he resolves this conflict finally by re-rooting himself within his native cultural tradition. He ransacks the El Dorado of his native tradition and its rich cultural heritage to forge an identity essentially embedded in both his familial and racial past.

As the title of Parthasarathy's poem clearly indicates, the metaphor of journey is crucial to the understanding of the entire book. In many postcolonial writings 'journey' is often used as crucial metaphor which provides a symbolic framework to the plot with loaded political implications. Few such texts include *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) by Wilson Harris, *The Road* (1965) by Wole Soyinka, *Rights of Passage* (1967) by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Petals of Blood* (1977) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Double Yoke* (1982) by Buchi Emecheta, *The Unbelonging* (1985) Joan Riley, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) by Chinua Achebe, *Omeros* (1990) by Derek Walcott, *The Famished Road* (1991) by Ben Okri, *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) by Anita Desai etc. Regarding the use of the motif of 'journeying' in post-independence literature, Elleke Boehmer says:

If the postcolonial quest was to establish control over the past and to give it form, it would seem to follow that the organizing themes of the literature, too, would be concerned with going back and with retrieval. From the foregoing, it

becomes apparent that the many acts of remembering that characterize post-independence writing partake in an overarching metanarrative of *journeying* and *return*. (Boehmer 190)

In *Rough Passage* the journey is as much physical as it is internal. It maps the poet's psychological states corresponding to the changes in the physical locale in course of his journey from home to abroad and finally back to home and in different cities of his homeland. The journey is finally directed towards the exploration of the identity of the poetic self disenchanted with a prolonged state of pernicious infatuation with an alien culture. This zest for genuine self-representation, which is the ultimate object of this self-exploratory inward march, is part of what Ellek Boehmer calls the necessity for 'cultural self-definition' (Boehmer 176) and 'demands for political self-determination with a quest for cultural and geographic authenticity' (Boehmer 178) in the wake of independence of the erstwhile colonies. In this self-exploratory march the poet in the very beginning of 'Exile' takes a stock of himself after his dream-shattering experiences in England:

As a man approaches thirty he may
takes stock of himself. ('Exile 1')

This idea of taking stock of oneself has some deeper significance than it appears on a cursory reading. Here the poet is casting a retrospective glance not only at his personal past but also at the last thirty years in the nation's history after its independence in 1947. *Rough Passage* was published in 1977 which is exactly thirty years after India's independence. The postcolonial poetic self is re-assessing the trajectory of both the national history and the individual experiences which are largely moulded by the former. Thus, the entire book can be read with a wider perspective as having something more than just individual self-introspection. Even though the country has achieved political independence for a considerable period of time, the colonial hangover still remains in its tendency of adoring and emulating the cultural mores and manners left by the erstwhile master. But with the passage of time as greater maturity enriches and hones the nation with finer sensibility, the nation feels the need for ideological independence in order to build an autonomous identity of its own. On the individual level too, the urge for cultural and linguistic independence coupled with an unprecedented desire for self-definition through self-representation gradually starts asserting. As Bruce King observes: "From the mid-1960s onward there is a different perspective among some new authors who write of local life from within their community" (King 31). After wasting his golden youth in a misdirected pursuit, Parthasarathy is finally back to his home and concludes this section of *Rough Passage* with the determination of living a life of greater quality in future:

I must give quality to the other half. ('Exile 8')

Commenting on the crucial significance of return of the postcolonial subject to its homeland in the process of cultural self-definition, Elleke Boehmer notes: "And, indeed, the culminating event in the journey narrative is that of homecoming, a moment which appears under a range of moods, extending from celebration to disillusionment" (Boehmer 192). In case of Parthasarathy's journeying homeward, he feels like an exile

even in his homeland and this may be due to the cultural gap between himself and his fellow citizens as a result of his easy grasp of the English language which is generally associated with a foreign culture. "In colonial countries," as Bruce King points out, "standard British usage was associated with the wealthy, the educated and those in power. Those who spoke a dialect or pidgin or used a local accent were looked down upon as uneducated, uncivilised or lower class" (King 53). As a result, Parthasarathy's sensibility always stays bifurcated between two different cultures, Indian and British, and two different languages, Tamil and English. Moreover, he feels crestfallen at the sordid Indian environment:

The streets are noisy, and trees
on Malabar Hill blind with dust.
Spring has gone unnoticed... ('Exile 3')

Hence, to relieve and refresh his drooping spirit the poet in 'Trial' tries to immerse himself in the loving fold of his beloved. In the third section entitled 'Homecoming' the issue of language comes to the fore. After having already realised that "Nothing can really / be dispensed with. The heart needs all" (Exile 8), the poet tries to resolve his linguistic dilemma by adapting the English language to express his native sensibility.

The *Rough Passage* is all about the poet's initial infatuation with and adulation for England, his visit to and stay in that place, his subsequent disillusionment and sense of alienation therein, his return to India and also the problem of cultural re-adjustment herein and his final assimilation into the culture of his origin. So, the title of this long poem aptly reflects not only Parthasarathy's rough and turbulent passage or stay in England but also his rough re-entry to and a complicated relocation in India. He went to England to study English literature and also wanted to settle down there and attain fame as an English poet. But to his utter shock he realised, while staying therein, the utopian nature of his dream. In this context what he says in his autobiographical essay "Whoring After English Gods" is worth quoting:

I decided that England would be my future home. And the English language would help me to belong there. In my ignorance I even hoped for fame as a poet in English. But events were to prove otherwise. The English autumn was a little too much for my hopefully expanding tropical petals. In England, at last, history caught up with me: I found myself crushed under two hundred years of British rule in India. I began to have qualms about my own integrity as an Indian. Had not Emerson said, 'India fell to British character'? My encounter with England only reproduced the by-now familiar pattern of Indian experience in England: disenchantment. Here was an England I was unable to come to terms with. The England I had known and loved existed nowhere, except in my mind. This other England I did not know even existed. My disenchantment was total. I felt betrayed. I was no longer a 'body of England's breathing English air'. (Parthasarathy 66)

Reflecting on the predicament of exile, Edward Said in his essay "Reflections on Exile" writes: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It

is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 173). Having failed to ever bridge the cultural gap existing between his home and England, Parthasarathy also felt alienated in a foreign culture. In the first part entitled 'Exile' the poet makes a contrapuntal study of the two different cultures, highlighting the difficulties he confronted in his abortive attempt to absorb an alien culture. The poems of this section also throw significant amount of light on the detrimental upshot of the colonial rule of the British empire on a colonised subject, especially the traumatic experience of getting uprooted from and the consequent loss of identity with their native culture and tradition and hence the quest for the originary cultural root, lying buried beneath the numbing and coercive impact of the enforced imposition of the coloniser's culture, with a view to resolving the crisis of identity.

Parthasarathy makes a retrospective introspection on the last thirty years he has already lived in the very opening poem as well as in the following ones of 'Exile'. Philosophising on what he has realised during this part of his life, he talks about the human proneness to similar kind of recurrent errors, making all gathered experiences nothing but a complete fiasco:

Experience doesn't always make for knowledge:

you make the same mistakes.
Do the same thing over again.
The woman you may have loved
You never married.

('Exile 1')

The poet now realises not only the futility but also the choking nature of his addiction for England as he absolutely fails to find a mooring in the foreign soil. The absolute disenchantment at the shattering of his romantic expectations about England is precisely expressed in the following despondent self-interrogation:

What have I come
here for from a thousand miles?
The sky is no different
Beggars are the same everywhere. The clubs
are there, complete with bar and golf-links.

('Exile 7')

However, his exile, as the poet feels, cannot be dispensed with as altogether fruitless as it gives him new realisation regarding his relationship with his native culture and language. So, in 'Exile 2' he says:

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.

(‘Exile 2’)

Here the metaphor of 'whoring' is instrumental in precisely pointing out the perspectival change in the poet regarding his relationship with the British culture. The expression 'English gods' unequivocally brings out the reverential attitude the poet used to have towards everything British. The almost sacrilegious juxtaposition of 'whoring' and 'English gods' seems to serve the purpose of pointing out the turn in the poet's attitude as realisation dawns on him regarding the sheer wastage of his youthful days in the futile pursuit after adopting English mores and manners with great veneration. Now he realises the transitory nature of his fascination for a foreign culture and language which is similar to the temporary phase of addiction one may feel for a prostitute. Just as it is not possible to marry a whore to dwell with her permanently, so also the poet finds it utterly impossible to live with a foreign cultural ambience forever, despite the irresistible, though short-lasting, attraction existing in both cases initially. This realisation is accompanied by another no less significant realisation of the poet concerning the interrelation between one's identity and language expressed through the metaphor of planting. Just as the natural growth of a tree gets thwarted with its vitality lost when it is uprooted from where it originally grew and transplanted to an alien soil, similarly language loses its natural power of expression and gets blunted in a foreign cultural milieu. The poet regrets of his days spent in London as he could hardly assimilate the British culture. The unforgable cultural gap between the East and the West is dwelt upon in the following excerpt from 'Exile 2':

Through holes in a wall, as it were,
lamps burned in the fog.
In a basement flat, conversation
filled the night, while Ravi Shankar,
cigarette stubs, empty bottles of stout
and crisps provided the necessary pauses.

(‘Exile 2’)

Here the fog is symbolic. It epitomises the difficulty of surviving in an alien culture. Regarding the crisis of identity faced by an exile, Said notes, "Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (Said 177). Just as the fog obscures the lamps, similarly the impact of a prolonged exposure to an alien cultural ambience wipes out one's association with one's root, blurring one's original identity. So, the metaphor of the wall of fog stands for the cultural divide existing invisible but insurmountable between the East and the West. Ravi Shankar stands for the poet's Tamil past which is lost under the deadening impacts of Western civilisation exposed through such images as 'cigarette stubs', 'empty bottles of stout and crisps' etc. and with which the poet is holding a dialogue to make a critical reappraisal of the course of life he has lived so far. Now he can see through the pernicious effect of his infatuated pursuit after aping and adopting foreign culture and the need for the root. "The intellectual allegiance to a foreign language and the emotional apprehension of its futility," to borrow the words of Bijay Kumar Das, "becomes his predicament which is central to the design of the poem" (Das 76).

Another important factor standing in the way of the poet's getting assimilated into a foreign culture is the contemptuous attitude of the British people towards the immigrants who were racially discriminated and slurred as 'coloureds'. While talking about the existential predicament of the migrant people, Benaouda Lebdaï in his article "The "I" in the Deconstruction of Frontiers through Memory: Postcolonial Diasporas" remarks: "For migrant people, the happiness of living in the West interacts with the disillusion of being rejected by European people who are often hostile towards them" (Lebdaï 61-62). Such experiences of racial discrimination is quite common in most of the migrant literatures. For example, Bharati Mukherjee also states her experience of similar kind of ill-treatment in the West: "In Canada, I felt not only that I was not a woman, I was not an individual, I was simply the colour of my skin" (Mukherjee 56). The French novelist Nina Bouraoui also talks in a similar vein about the diasporic experience of heinous racial discriminations which she considers as a form of 'violence': "...there you will be scorched by racism, prejudice of skin color, and intolerance" (Bouraoui 32). In case of Parthasarathy it's quite evident that the English people were so much disdainful of the outsiders that they even said that the British environment had failed to bring about any positive change in the immigrants despite the long stay of the latter in the country. On the New Year Eve the poet heard of an old Englishman at Trafalgar Square, an important, fashionable locality in London, speaking derogatorily of the incorrigibility of their immigrants:

It's no use trying
to change people. They'll be what they are.

(Exile 2')

Besides, the Britons were also very much proud of their imperialist past. So, they often remembered and glorified the names of their historical empire builders and those of other European nations like da Gamas, Clives and Dupleixs. The memories of Queen Victoria and Boadicea were also kept alive. These apart, the poet also got repelled at the actual reality of the British environment. Before coming to England, he conceived of the city of London as a paragon of perfection and hence an ideal place to live in. But he got out and out frustrated at its sordid reality when he actually came to live therein:

...the city is no jewel, either:
lanes full of smoke and litter,
with puddles of unwashed
English children.

(Exile 2')

Finally, the poet, after much deliberation, returns to India with a new understanding of the inseparable knot binding an individual with his root:

..... I return
to the city I had quarrelled with
a euphoric archipelago,
to the hard embrace of its streets,
its traffic of regulated

affections, uneventful but welcome.

(Rough Passage 21)

However, the return to the home is also not smooth and uncomplicated as the journey abroad has been. Now begins a new problem which is that of cultural re-location to the land that he earlier had detested and deserted. The point was, to use the words of Nissim Ezekiel, "How to feel it home..." (Ezekiel 180). He returned home with certain romantic images about his homeland in mind and now he gets disillusioned in facing the actual reality therein.

So, his sense of alienation keeps persisting in India and he feels like an exile even in his home. This sense of being an 'alien insider', to use the words of Purushottama Lal (Lal 30), is the most problematic as well as fascinating aspect of the identity of Parthasarathy as an Indian poet writing in English. With a view to alleviating this sense of loneliness the poet takes recourse to the loving embrace of his beloved. His passionate relationship with his ladylove as a source of sustenance in world with which he hardly feels related is the central theme of 'Trial'. To use his own words, "The second part, 'Trial', written between 1961 and 1974, celebrates love as a reality here and now. Against the turmoil of non-relationship, personal love holds forth the promise of belonging...The impulse to preserve is at the bottom of 'Trial' (Parthasarathy 109). In fact the poet's act of getting intimate with the lady at times appear to be a kind of attempt on his part to recover his lost connection with his native cultural and linguistic background. Confronted with a profound sense of estrangement even in India and afflicted with a severe crisis of identity, the poet tries to find fulfilment in growing intimate with his lady. The lady, as it seems, provides him a means of re-connection with and a point of re-entry to his lost tradition. The misdirected pursuit after British 'whore' led to the almost irreparable loss of his root. With regard to the complex mechanism of fortification of identity in what he describes as a "new, redeemed post-colonial nation," Chris Prentice says, "In order to assert its own security of identity, threats to that identity are necessarily projected as external" (Prentice 48). The disillusioned postcolonial poetic self in Parthasarathy also identifies the mistakes and tends not only to distance itself from the very source which led it astray and caused the crisis of identity but also to exterminate it entirely:

He went for the wrong gods from the start.
And marriage made it worse.
He hadn't read the Greek poets well:
better to bury a woman than marry her.

(Homecoming 12')

Back in India, the poet is in a way trying to restore and repair his severed link with his cultural and linguistic root through personal attachment to his Indian beloved. As if through his embrace with her he can relocate and touch again his lost root. In this way he can also heal his linguistic inertness, overcome his cultural numbness and restore his native sensibility in moments of warm physical intimacy:

Touch brings the body into focus,
restores colour to inert hands...

(Trial 7')

Thus, the 'touch' of the Indian lady triggers the process of revitalisation of what has been devitalised through the association with the foreign 'whore' of 'Exile 2'. On the national level too, the same process of rejuvenation and reorganisation is at work after around thirty years of independence. In fact, the nation too is passing through a phase of 'trial' in order to test its capacity to harmoniously incorporate and accommodate a wide variety of communities, cultures and languages in a postcolonial global context:

I grasp your hand
in a rainbow of touch.

('Trial 1')

Here the idea of a multicultural and multilingual nation is imaged through the metaphor of a 'rainbow of touch', emoting the Indian ethos of unity in diversity.

In 'Exile 8', the final poem of 'Exile', the poet arrives in the city of Calcutta. He is undertaking a journey towards Jadavpur to meet his ladylove. As his tongue is burdened with the weight of unuttered words, he wants to get himself relieved of his unexpressed emotions by coming into intimate contact with the lady:

as I walk, my tongue hunchbacked
with words, towards Jadavpur
to your arms.

('Exile 8')

The poet uses highly erotic imagery to describe their union:

...Your breasts,
sharp with desire, hurt my fingers.

('Exile 8')

However, even at such moments of warm intimacy with his partner the poet still feels dissatisfied and lonely:

Feelings beggar description,
shiver in dark alleys of the mind,
hungry and alone.

('Exile 8')

The metaphor of 'dark alley' clearly brings out the feeling of loneliness surging inside the poet's mind. This sense of alienation and a note of dissatisfaction and despair, as found in the present poem, is all-pervasive in entire *Rough Passage*. The sight of the 'grey sky' in India in 'Exile 8' produces an uncomfortable sensation in the poet's eyes and he also feels tormented by the spectacles of a multitude of porters, rickshaw-pullers, barbers, hawkers, fortune-tellers, loungers on the streets of Calcutta just as he was not happy with the sight of 'lanes full of smoke and litter, with puddles of unwashed English children' in the city of London in 'Exile 2'. William Walsh has aptly remarked, "Disappointment is his principal theme, whether with the edgy complications of love, with the insoluble problems of poetic composition, or, as with England, in face of the actuality of what he expected. He accepts disappointment with an irritable but unprotesting glumness, a slightly morose recognition of the way things are" (Walsh 135). In the face of an all-

engulfing sense of loneliness the poet feels the necessity of embracing everything that he has encountered as part of his experience:

...Nothing can really
be dispensed with. The heart needs all.

(‘Exile 8’)

This accommodative, inclusive and holistic approach is perhaps the only way to resolve the dilemma of a bicultural upbringing.

It is also to be noted that although the poet takes resort to personal relationship with his ladylove in order to find relief from the tension and anxiety of feeling unrelated to the external world in his homeland, he even fails to feel sincerely and wholly associated with his lady. The haunting sense of lack of relatedness--a feeling that thwarted his dream of feeling at home in abroad and that also made him feel ill at ease in India and thereby complicating his re-adjustment in the homeland--even creeps into his personal relationship to spoil his intimate moments with his partner. Hence the relief and solace he tends to seek in the act of private love making also remain nothing less than another unfulfilled desire in his life, adding to his sense of rootlessness and aggravating his crisis of identity. If ‘Exile’ is all about the poet’s failure to properly connect himself to an alien cultural and linguistic ambience, ‘Trial’ is about the same person’s failure to forge a meaningful relationship with his loved one. Thus, the poems in ‘Trial’ can be read as parallel to those in ‘Exile’ keeping in mind how the former ones correspond to the latter ones in evoking the poet’s feelings of despair, desolation and alienation--be it with respect to the broader issue of cultural adjustment or that in private relationship. His inability to eke out a niche in an alien set-up in ‘Exile’ is paralleled to his inability to form a complete relationship with his beloved in ‘Trial’. He even can hardly conceive his lady in entirety. Rather his perception of her self is always in bits and pieces. He always perceives the lady, as we find in many places of ‘Trial’, in terms of fragmented parts of the body rather than in totality. Her image is constructed only through the lover’s eroticised fantasy of certain body parts of the lady like ‘hand’, ‘neck’, ‘chin’, ‘breast’, ‘eye’, ‘hair’ etc which hardly provide a complete picture of the partner as a distinct human being. He even cannot establish a successful communication with her. He remains a stranger forever:

Love I haven’t the key
to unlock his gates.

(‘Trial 1’)

Even the moments of supreme ecstasy during intercourse fail to provide him complete satisfaction as the pressure of premature ejaculation seems to embitter his bed-pleasure and what remains is but a nightmarish scream of a devastated self:

how should I not scream,
‘I haven’t finished?’

(‘Trial 1’)

and a more agonising realisation of lack of sincerely articulated communion with even the loved one:

Yet that too would pass unheeded.

(‘Trial 1’)

As the poet ultimately becomes unable to find a proper mooring through erotic affair, in the following section entitled ‘Homecoming’ there is a significant shift in focus from love to language. Dwelling upon the predicament of a bilingual postcolonial subject, Parthasarathy in his article entitled “The Exile as Writer: On Being an Indian Writer in English” says:

It was the tragedy, and the tragedy of men like me, to have grown up in the twilight of the Raj. I was thirteen when the Union Jack folded up over India. Since then, the English have gone home but the English language is still with us. Nothing is more incongruous in India. English will always remain a foreign language to us. I realised that I could never function as a poet in English. I felt embittered, and was inclined to agree with Victor Anant that we were ‘Macaulay’s bastards’. (Parthasarathy 66-67)

Now in ‘Homecoming’ the poet attempts to resolve his aforesaid existential dilemma consequent upon a bicultural and bilingual upbringing by adaptation of English language as a medium of successfully conveying a genuinely native sensibility. This is also what Parthasarathy clearly states in his article entitled “The Exile as Writer: On Being an Indian Writer in English”: “From the beginning I saw my task as one of acclimatizing the English language to an indigenous tradition. In fact the tenor of *Rough Passage* is explicit: to initiate a dialogue between myself and my Tamil past” (Parthasarathy 7). Here Parthasarathy’s method of negotiating his bicultural linguistic dilemma is quite redolent of the following observation of Raja Rao:

One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own; the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up, ... but not of our emotional make-up.... We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect... The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression... (Rao vii).

Such approach towards the indigenisation of an alien tongue is also an important step towards the national coming-into-being in a postcolonial state. What the postcolonial critic Elleke Boehmer says in this respect is worth citing:

To conceive an independent national identity, postcolonial writers concentrated on developing a symbolic vocabulary that was recognizably indigenous or at least other to European representation and yet To conceive at the same time intelligible within a global grammar of post-war politics. In particular, they

enjoined one another to tap into the African or Indian wellsprings of their cultures in order to offset the borrowed influences of Europe. (Boehmer 178-79)

After his return to his native state Tamil Nadu and his mother tongue Tamil, the poet acknowledges unashamedly in the very inaugural poem of 'Homecoming':

My tongue in English chains,
I return, after a generation, to you.
I am at the end
of my dravidic tether,
hunger for you unassuaged.
I falter, stumble.

('Homecoming 1')

After facing a lot of difficulty in his long-drawn attempt at absorbing the coloniser's language, he now feels the necessity of coming back to one's own linguistic tradition:

How long can foreign poets
provide the staple of your lines?
Turn inward. Scrape the bottom of your past.

('Homecoming 2')

This 'turn(ing) inward' is essentially the most crucial part in the poet's self-exploratory inward march for formulating his distinct identity. Here the motif of a disillusioned poet returning home is quite reminiscent of the similar, if not identical, case of another poet, the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who also, after having failed to find a place he thinks he deserves in an alien language, returned to his mother tongue and selected the same as the medium for writing poetry. However, what makes the difference between these two 'return's is the fact that whereas Madhusudan on his return was greeted with a ready-made language which is matured and full-fledgedly developed, making the re-entry of the native quite smooth and easy, Parthasarathy was troubled with a worn out language utterly degenerated and de-glamorised:

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

('Homecoming 1')

As a result, his 'turn(ing) inward' fails to produce an instant revitalisation of his poetic self. Saddled with the pressure of an almost moribund language, he feels utterly helpless and profoundly dejected:

the bull, Nammalvar took by the horns,
is today an unrecognizable carcass
quick with the fleas of Kodambakkam.
There is little you can do about it
except throw up your hands.

('Homecoming 2')

Regarding the coming back of the exiled postcolonial subject to the motherland in the Caribbean literature, Elleke Boehmer writes, "In Caribbean writing, dreamlike and mythic images of African homecoming often figure a desire to reconnect with the past after a long history of dispossession" (Boehmer 192). This is precisely because the memory of the past has a crucial role to play in the process of consolidation of the image of the self and formation of identity of one who has been long in an alien culture cut off totally from the native soil. "The past figures importantly," as Dennis Walder aptly puts it in his book *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory*, "in people's self-representations in general, because it is through memories of the past that we represent ourselves to ourselves..." (Walder 35). Parthasarathy, repelled by the horrific state of decomposition and desiccation of the contemporary Tamil language, moves back in time and reaches the classical period of Tamil language when it was in its full glory, thus presenting the contrastive images of what Boehmer calls 'the reduced present' and 'the legendary past' (Boehmer 189) side by side:

Now, hooked on celluloid, you reel
down plush corridors.

(Homecoming 1)

This movement back in time simultaneously induces the process of the postcolonial subject's cultural retrieval in the wake of independence of his motherland. The new born consciousness makes him reject the slavish inclination of imitating the master's linguistic techniques and compositional craftsmanship. Rather he feels the necessity of going back to his cultural past which is initiated with the process of going back to his familial and personal past:

How long can foreign poets
provide the staple of your lines?
.....
.....
Ransack the cupboard
for skeletons of your Brahmin childhood
... You may then,
Perhaps, strike out a line for yourself
from the iron of life's ordinariness.

(Homecoming 2')

As an essential part of healing the cultural rift caused during colonial encounter and continuing even after independence through neo-colonial politics of cultural and commercial enslavements, the post-independence writers often "attempted to find and describe networks of racial and ancestral affiliation, to unearth generational memory" (Boehmer 182). This tendency of returning to familial past through the bylanes of memory is finely exemplified in the poetry of R. Parthasarathy and A. K. Ramanujan among the post-independence Indian poets writing in English. Boehmer further observes, "For a people shipwrecked by history, a story of the past, even if wholly or in part a fiction, again offers a kind of restitution" (Boehmer 189). Because of this restorative value of the past, Parthasarathy turns the pages of his family album which is a kind of

what Dennis Walder describes as a "visual representation or image that becomes the only remaining, half-remembered trace of the point at which the past of an individual connects with the wider, collective pasts of family, society, and history" (Walder 2). In this context what Benedict Anderson in his significant reflections on past, memory and amnesia says in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* is worth mentioning:

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. After experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to 'remember' the consciousness of childhood.... How strange it is to need another's help to learn that this naked baby in the yellowed photograph, sprawled happily on rug or cot, is you. The photograph, fine child of the age of mechanical reproduction, is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence (birth certificates, diaries, report cards, letters, medical records, and the like) which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it cannot be 'remembered,' must be narrated. (Anderson 204)

Parthasarathy in 'Trial 2' attempts to revive the memory of his past by looking at the family album of her wife in her childhood days and narrates in poetic terms what it brings to his mind from the depth of oblivion:

Over the family album, the other night,
I shared your childhood:

(Trial 2')

By looking at the photographs of her wife at different stages of her growth from childhood through adolescence to adulthood he can perceive what Anderson describes as the 'physiological and emotional changes' in course of coming to maturity of her wife. The pictures also assist him to notice the profound psychological impact of the sad demise of her father and how she gradually overcame the shock to regain her mental health with the passage of time:

...You rolled yourself
into a ball the afternoon Father died,
till time unfurled you
like a peal of bells.

(Trial 2)

And finally the album, which is what Benedict Anderson calls the 'fine child of the age of mechanical reproduction', bears 'documentary evidence' to how she attained 'personhood' and 'identity' (Anderson 204):

...How your face
bronzed, as flesh and bone struck
a touchwood day. Purged,

you turned the corner in a child's steps.

('Trial 2')

Such recollections through family album of his wife's childhood also trigger a meditative mood of self-introspection in the poet himself. So, in 'Trial 7' he plunges into deep rumination taking the advantage of nocturnal darkness which is conducive to self-reflection:

It is night alone helps
to achieve a lucid exclusiveness.

("Trial 7')

Eric R. Kandel, the Nobel prize winning American-Austrian medical doctor with specialisation in neuroscience, observes in his book *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind*: "For all of us, explicit memory makes it possible to leap across space and time and conjure up events and emotional states that have vanished into the past yet somehow continue to live on in our minds" (Kandel 279). In the present mood of meditative self-introspection the poet also moves back in time and space in order to construct a singularly individual identity of his own:

Time that had dimmed
your singular form
by its harsh light now makes
recognition possible
through this opaque lens.

('Trial 7')

Eric R. Kandel further says, "But recalling a memory episodically—no matter how important the memory—is not like simply turning to a photograph in an album. Recall of memory is a creative process" (Kandel 279). The poet's recollective journey back into the past also produces instant revival of a host of memories lying buried under the dust of the 'unlettered years' ('Homecoming 1'). So, he says:

Touch brings the body into focus,
restores colour to inert hands...

('Trial 7')

According to Eric Kandel, as already noted, recollection of memory is a creative process and in this context he further adds, "What the brain stores is thought to be only a core memory. Upon recall, this core memory is then elaborated upon and reconstructed, with subtractions, additions, elaborations, and distortions. (Kandel 279-280). Parthasarathy recollects the memory of a family reunion in 'Homecoming 3':

And so it eventually happened--
a family reunion not heard of
since grandfather died in '59--in March
this year...

('Homecoming 3')

He also proceeds through creatively elucidating, editing and modifying his recalled memories. He recounts the arrival of his cousins from the depth of oblivion:

...Cousins arrived in Tiruchchanur

in overcrowded private buses,
the dust of unlettered years
clouding instant recognition.

('Homecoming 1')

and particularly elaborates the figure of Sundari with interspersed descriptions on their shared childhood memories in order to emote the huge lapse of time since they had met each other for the last time:

Sundari, who had squirrelled up and down
forbidden tamarind trees in her long skirt
every morning with me,
stood there, that day, forty years taller,
her three daughters floating
like safe planets near her.

('Homecoming 1')

The description of this family got together is quite interesting from a postcolonial point of view. In his essay "Literature and Society" Ngugi wa Thiong'o points out the insidious harms involved in getting fed by the worldview of the coloniser: "But to make economic and political control the more complete, the colonizing power tries to control the cultural environment: education, religion, language, literature, songs, forms of dances, every form of expression, hoping in this way to control a people's values and ultimately their world outlook, their image and definition of self" (Ngugi 12). In order to counter this kind of ideological imperialism, Ngugi, in another essay titled "Moving the Centre: Towards a Pluralism of Cultures" promoted the cultural necessity for asserting "the right (of the erstwhile colonized) to name the world for ourselves" (Ngugi 21). In a similar vein Parthasarathy also attempts to disalienate a foreign language, suffusing it with an Indian ethos. The atmosphere of familial camaraderie in an Indian set-up in 'Homecoming 3' bears stark contrast to that of friends meeting together in exile in a basement flat of the city of London in 'Exile 2'. The mechanical amicability of the former (i.e. 'Exile 2') throws into sharp relief the deep personal attachment involved in the latter (i.e. 'Homecoming 3'). The 'cigarette stubs, and 'empty bottles of stout and crisps' of exiledom are replaced by the 'familiar coconuts' and 'tamarind trees' of homely association. The asphyxiating miasma of fog and cigarette smoke and the sordidness of London 'lanes full of smoke and litter' of 'Exile 2' are displaced by the mellowed cosiness of 'rice-and-pickle afternoons' of 'Homecoming 3'. Here the recollections of memory do not only serve as a connecting link between the present self of the bicultural, postcolonial poet and his pre-expatriation past but also consolidate what Gaston Bachelard calls a "counter-discursive rather than homologous view of the world" (Bachelard 193). A thoroughly Indian atmosphere is evoked with the memory of the family members leisurely basking in the warmth of a long-awaited family reunion, 'sitting crosslegged on the steps / of the choultry' ('Homecoming 3'). Such subtle attempts

at building a wholesome Indian ambience can be read as part of the project of recuperating the lost tradition--a loss imposed by the colonisers through the strategic cultural imperialism of replacing the Tamil hourglass with the European chronometer and fettering the native rivers by the imperial bridges:

Bridges tame unruly rivers.
The hourglass of the Tamil mind
is replaced by the exact chronometer
of Europe.

(Exile 7')

With a new born awareness of the cultural necessity of national and individual self-formations, the decolonised creative impetus attempts to overhaul the master's language to accommodate a native sensibility by evoking the native tradition and its rich cultural and linguistic heritage through a process of 'cultural revivalism' (Boehmer 179), in order to forge an identity essentially embedded in both familial and racial past predating the colonial encounter. The odyssey of self-exploration, which gradually moves towards its end with the achievement of certain replacements, reinstatements and transformations in the external world, simultaneously induces changes in the interior world of the poet, bringing fresh realisation regarding the transformed state of the poetic self: "I am no longer myself..." (Homecoming 14). With this changed sensibility, the poet no longer feels the need to bother about the erosion of innocence of 'Exile' and looming sense of untimely end of 'Trial'. Turning his heart inside out, he is now living in a state of unbounded timelessness which bestows him with a feeling of tranquil serenity: "I shall, perhaps, go on / like this, unmindful of day / melting into the night" (Homecoming 14). In this state of perfect composure, he feels at ease with his self and surrounding, unconcerned of the insignificant precarities of life:

Hereafter, I should be content,
I think, to go through life
with the small change of uncertainties.

(Homecoming 14)

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *La Poétique de l'espace*. qtd in "The 'I' in the Deconstruction of Frontiers through Memory: Postcolonial Diasporas." Benaouda Lebdaï. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* XXXXII.1 (March 2015): 57-68. *Project Muse*. Web. 22 Sept. 2022.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- Bouraoui, Nina. *Tomboy*. Trans. Marjorie Attignol Salvodon and Jehanne-Marie Gavarini. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. Print.

- Das, Bijay Kumar. "Parthasarathy's Verse: A Study." *Perspectives on the Poetry of R. Parthasarathy*. Ed. B. K. Das. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1997-98. Print.
- Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- Kandel, Eric R. *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006. Print.
- King, Bruce. *The New English Literatures: Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980. Print.
- King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.
- Lal, Purushottama. *The Alien Insiders*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1996. Print.
- Lebdai, Benaouda. "The 'I' in the Deconstruction of Frontiers through Memory: Postcolonial Diasporas." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* XXXXII.1 (March 2015): 57-68. *Project Muse*. Web. 22 Sept. 2022.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *The Holder of the World*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1993. Print.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. "Literature and Society." *Writers in Politics: Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1981. Print.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. "Moving the Centre: Towards a Pluralism of Cultures." *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey, 1993. Print.
- Parthasarathy, R. *Rough Passage*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
- . "Rough Passage: Notes on the Making of a Poem." *Studies in Indian Poetry in English*. Ed. O. P. Bhatnagar. Jaipur: Rachana Prakashan, 1981. Print.
- . "Whoring After English Gods." *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Bearings*. Ed. Amrithayagam Guy. London: Macmillan, 1982. Print.
- . "The Exile as Writer: On Being an Indian Writer in English." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* XXIV.1 (March 1, 1989): 1-11. Web. 15. Dec. 2020.
- Prentice, Chris. "Some Problems of Response to Empire in Settler Post-colonial Societies." *De-Scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality*. Eds. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Rao, Raja. Foreword. *Kanthapura*. New York: New Directions, 1967. Print.
- Said, Edward W. "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003. Print.
- Walder, Dennis. *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Walsh, William. "The Meeting of Language and Literature and the Indian Example." *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Bearings*. Ed. Amrithayagam Guy. London: Macmillan, 1982. Print.