

## CONTEMPORARY POETRY: A CRITIQUE OF ART AND SEMANTICS

Dr Arunachalam Angappan

ASSOC. PROF. & HOD OF ENGLISH FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
HADHRAMOUT UNIV. OF SC. & TECH. P.B.No. 9256 SEIYUN REPUBLIC OF YEMEN.  
< dr\_arunachalam2004@yahoo.co.in >

### ABSTRACT

The paper offers a critique of the creative process and the meaning-making process. It claims that creativity is a kind of mystical activity and is contiguous to an urge to communicate, a communication that is never straight or simple but contingent upon a kind of code. That which has been encoded during the creative process by a soul hallowed and sanctified can be decoded for both enjoyment and enlightenment even by ordinary mortals. The paper concludes that a civilization, and an artifact as an embodiment of that civilization, can best be judged by its amateurs not by the professional experts who tend to develop a technical jargon of their own to place themselves in an indispensable position between the creator and the ordinary reader.

A writer writes because he is itching to communicate something. He has a message and that message craves to be disseminated in spite of it running the risk of being dubbed crazy. We may call him a neurotic, sick, maladjusted and so on for every divine messenger, social reformer runs this risk. Either he is at odds with the society or there is something utterly kinky, skewed about the world. Harold Bloom says, "The dialectic of cosmic love and hate governs poetic incarnation." Certainly it is this 'cosmic love and hate', a kind of "catastrophe"— "a fearsome process" (Lodge 2003: 219) by which the possessed individual is reborn as a poet.

I for one, as a poet, write about the social milieu of which I am a product. I cannot escape this fact. In fact, an artifact, any artifact for that matter, is a verbal construct embedded in the social milieu and produced by the writer who is a product of that milieu; it thereafter becomes the property of the reader bestowing on him a right to deconstruct while negotiating for meaning, which depends on his own mental construct. There can be limitless meanings – as many as there are readers who will go on creating their own mental constructs, and who will go on creating as many meanings as the number of times they go back to it. The verbal construct may remain constant whereas the perceived construct (understanding of the meaning by the reader) becomes mutative depending on the times and culture to which he belongs. An artifact is never a product; it is always a process. Once the poet completes his process, there begins the endless process of meaning-making by endless visitors to that artifact. "The author *encodes* a work; the reader must try to *decode* it" (Guerin 1992: 338).

Thus goes endlessly the process of creation and the process of re-creation. The artifact offers something to everybody, especially to those who scrutinize the artifact as a cultural phenomenon and approach it from the angle of Cultural Studies

which "... is composed of the elements of Marxism, new historicism, feminism, gender studies, anthropology, studies of race and ethnicity, film theory, sociology, urban studies, ... .. and those fields that focus on social and cultural forces that either create community or cause division and alienation." (Guerin 1992: 240)

A poet writes about what he intensely feels about only. As the Canadian poet-novelist Stephen Gill claims, there are voices inside every possessed soul (read 'poetic soul'). "Some of these voices remain always within and some appear once in a while" (Sarangi 2005: 166). The American poet, Ruth Wildes Schuler believes that "the poet is stirred by an inner voice that compels him to capture minute slices of life on paper—the sea gull dipping his wings against a late evening breeze or a child's tender kiss on a grandfather's cheek, but the poet's responsibility stretches beyond that. He must point his finger and speak out against the social ills of his time" (1977: 6-7). He cannot put his thumb in his mouth and keep shut. He throws it up, throws it out and keeps on rattling the conscience of the conquering hordes, as they are always there "equally skilled at using the poet's tools—symbols and words to enslave men into a state of apathy." (1977: 7)

No poet worth his calling can sit up, write down a few lines just like that and expect the world to accept it as a piece of literature. He has to put his heart, mind and soul into those few lines. For that some event, some phenomenon, say a political, social or economic injustice must affect him, wound him, hurt him, must impact heavily on his mind and soul. Some emotion, some feeling, some sentiment, which he must deeply suffer from. Unless and otherwise, it is literally next to impossible. Take my own case. I do not write much of love verses because I do not have the capacity for it. I cannot romanticize, because my concerns lie elsewhere. I am agitated over the stark realities of life to which I want to draw the attention of the people for the purpose of correction; I am not an ostrich; I do not merely create an aura of wonder, wrapping up the sordid facts of life around. Most contemporary poets fall under this category. Glorification of the universe and the earth yielded space to the ugly realities of life. This trend started, well, in 1922 with the publication of T.S. Eliot's **The Wasteland**.

A poet is very much a part of the process of life in his times. It is ever more so in our times. He does not travel much back into the glorious, distant past. If he does, that is for *mutatis mutandis* only. A contemporary poet lives here and now. He perceives things, he gets affected, he writes. A poet in our times is a committed poet, not a pure poet beating his luminous wings in the void of fancy. Consider for a moment the breed of poets in our midst like A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, A.B. Vajpayee, Krishna Srinivas, Mohamed Fakhruddin, Judith Wright, Kaisaku Ikeda, Lee Qui Sheen, Wole Ajake, Ruth Wildes Schuler and a host of others both in the East and the West. Most of Wright's poetry was devoted to the cause of the plight of the Australian Aborigines who were uprooted from and driven from their lands by the British Colonizers. The poetry of Kalam and Vajpayee are expressions of sensitive souls that are deeply anguished over the socio-economic divides and the inequities of people placed at some advantage over others by some quirk of fate. While some lash their whips harshly hiding not their anger against the perpetrators of evil, others

adopt gentle mockery or satire or an ironical portrayal and try to communicate the decay of the society in a lively, convincing and pleasing manner.

The social milieu of his times is inescapable to any writer. Society creates, shapes the writer, and conversely the writer also can create the society—that is, if his writing is a genuinely felt product. He presents the decay which stares the reader at his face, discomfiting and embarrassing; he runs to at least put on a mask to cover that ugliness, if he cannot drop that ugliness entirely. To that extent, the ugly, seamy, ignoble aspect is under check. It is true that, as Harekrushna Mahanta says, most modern writings “delineate the dark sides of life” but I fear whether, as he desires, it would be possible that “the motto of poems and stories, paintings and essays as well as features must be of positive ideology”(2005: 7). I for one do not endorse either the Marxist ideology or the rightist/capitalist/theocratic ideology. Genuine creativity is a law unto itself; it shapes itself according to the times in which it incarnates itself. Its only motto could be, may be should be if the reader agrees, truth. What I communicate may not be the literal truth but the ‘untruth’ (if you consider ‘poetry’ in general as such) is capable of being “interpreted allegorically as ways of representing an underlying general truth” (Daiches 2001: 53).

As to the crucial act of composition, I can say the following keeping my own experiences as a starting point. Mostly I write on the spur of the moment, that is to say, instantly. As and when and where I suffer from an intensity of feeling. It depends on how I am affected, how much I am affected, how deeply I am affected. Most often words simply fly about like angels in the vast universe, alight gently on the white sheet, fold their wings delicately, and Lo! There comes alive the icon, the verbal icon. As the sculptor gently chisels open the eyes of the figure he has sculpted, the whole is there in an instant. The images, symbols, metaphors—all are there, obeying some intrinsic command. The long and laborious process of the sculptor chiseling the sculpture remains seemingly ungone through, just the last phase of opening the eye; it all happens so quickly, so, so well ordered. May be, there is a mental chiseling between the instant of conception and delivery, but that remains seemingly ungone, unsuffered.

Some other times, I postpone writing it down. I brood over it like Wordsworth’s hen until my eggs become warmer enough for the chicks to break out of the shells; I let it, I mean the intense feeling/emotion/sentiment, to sink deeper and deeper, penetrate my person layer by layer until it sort of explodes my whole personality and drives me in search of a piece of paper and pen. I feel quite only if I accomplished the writing. Still there are occasions, a third kind, when something agitates, possesses, tortures my soul but will not flow out, something like an air-block in a conduit preventing the liquid flow. The much-longed sense of satisfaction of expression eludes; I feel like sitting and weeping. Many fellow travelers share the above truth about the creative process.

Most contemporary poets do not look for architectonic excellence. They rather look for aesthetics in the shocking treatment of an everyday, commonly perceived but generally neglected subject matter. They do not prefer metrical compositions though

many among them can. These are days of free verse. As Seturaman et al say, "There has always been a movement against conventional metre as seen in the variations and substitutions that poets introduce in the basic metrical pattern" (57). One or two sonnets I wrote in the initial days were not encouraged. People, not necessarily expert critics, spurn rhyme. But there definitely is an internal rhythm without which no composition can qualify for being poetry. What makes the poet's selection of words supremely poetic is their capacity to encode meanings and values. Semiologists, according to Martin Gray, "perceive literature as a kind of **CODE** or institution which transmits and formalizes meanings and values" (259). It is this encoding that throws obstacles in the path of the ordinary readers' enjoyment of poetry and makes their decoding journey sometimes quite adventurous and interesting, many times quite arduous and frustrating.

#### **Appreciation of Poetry: Adventurous or Arduous?**

I shall begin with a quotation from **Walt Whitman** (1819-1892):

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? ("Song of Myself" ll. 31-32). One can understand the difficulty as well as the aura of greatness attached to the reading and meaning-making of poetry.

As K.L. Knickerbocker and H. Willard Reninger remark in the "Preface" to their book *Interpreting Literature* (1978), "...most students regard imaginative literature as a conspiracy against their mental and emotional peace. Their minds are accustomed to work best at a literal...level" (v). They are "convinced that in most instances these shackles can be broken, that literal minds can be liberated" (v).

Nobody can be talked into enjoying poetry, but one can bring oneself to such pleasures by learning to understand individual poems. When one reads a poem for the first time, a certain kind of sense comes through to us almost immediately. This is the poem's **plain sense**, sometimes called literal sense or textual meaning. With this begins, but not ends, the understanding of a poem. The literal meaning, i.e., paraphrasing helps to move onto the other level, higher level, of understanding the imagery. "The function of imagery in poetry is identical with its function in everyday speech: it presents to the reader his concrete world of things, and recalls to him the sight and sound and feel of them. With imagery the poet peoples and furnishes the world of his poem, and causes us to experience that world as directly and unmistakably as we experience life itself" (Knickerbocker 1978: 219). At this point we are moving from the plain sense to the **figurative sense**. Why the poet should use figures of speech? Can't he say it plainly? Such a question is asked as if only poets resorted to figures of speech. But our everyday life is peppered with figures of speech. For example, we "lead a dog's life," "smell a rat," "got it for a song."

Then there is the question of symbol. Symbols are identified and their meanings made clear by the full context of the poem. It can be stated, echoing the formalist school of criticism, that "*the whole poem helps to determine the meaning of its parts, and, in turn, each part helps to determine the meaning of the whole poem*" (Knickerbocker 1978: 220).

There are other elements. It is difficult for readers to believe that such matters as rhythm and rhyme are used to convey meaning. Poetry is speech, and the

voice, or tone, of the poet communicates his attitude toward the facts of the poem. A very old definition of poetry regards it as a fusion of sound and sense. Note that word *fusion*: not a mechanical combination, but a melting together of sound and sense. The pulsations or the beats in each line is called rhythm; it is measured in foot; each foot may contain one or more syllables: some syllables are stressed and some others unstressed. Each line may have one or more metres. The most commonly used metre is penta (five) metre. Some have tetra (four). Still some have just one (mono). Rhythm is not a mere decoration, but a basic element in the poem's structure and meaning. One of the purposes of rhyme is to tie the sense together with sound.

In short, a poem is a living organism which contains the necessary elements of its own life. If the poem is a good one, every element in it contributes to its meaning.

A poem has two levels of meaning: the literal level and the figurative-symbolic level. A poem suggests much more than it says literally: like lovers' conversation, a poem gives out hints of extensive meanings along the way. Poets do not play a hide-and-seek game—the hidden meaning is not secretly and deliberately placed there by the poet. And yet, as Wolfgang Iser says, "... literary texts are full of unexpected twists and turns, and frustration of expectations" (Lodge 2003: 193). The figurative meaning is mistaken for the hidden meaning. A poem has a concentration and intensity which helps to make it memorable. The right word in the right place, the intimate fusion of sound and sense, and the economy of rich suggestion are virtues of the structure of most poetry. The misreading of poetry comes from the reader's failure to realize that there are many languages within the English language, such as the languages of science, history, journalism, and, of course, the language of poetry itself. When we read a poem we sense the language of poetry because of the devices of rhythm (iambic [one stressed followed by an unstressed syllable] pentameter, the most commonly used form), rhyme (queer/near in Frost's "Stopping by Woods..."), figurative language (a horse that thinks), and symbol (a horse that stands for practical sense as against the impractical sense of its driver).

It requires various kinds of scholarly information—biographical, historical, and textual, all together or separately, for an academic appreciation. An academic critic, according to David Daiches (2001) "is often tempted to combine information, explanation, elucidation, and praise in his remarks on a given work or a given writer" (281). This eclectic method is not necessarily muddle headed. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century academic criticism, the "bio-critical" approach flourished vigorously. It succeeds "in conveying to the reader a sense of a writer's achievement set against the background of his life and time" (282). This approach was much useful in assessing the writers of a period as a whole and the writings of a period in their entirety than in assessing the individual writers and individual works. This was more in the nature of a critical chat than a strictly literary criticism.

A fully professional criticism depends on precision and subtlety. His activity may be ontological (the philosophical question concerning the nature of imaginative literature), functional (what literature does, that is to define it in terms of its function), normative (distinguishing the good from the bad), descriptive (the realm of description includes a value judgement also), psychological (the question of how

the literary mind operates in the act of creation), or appreciative (asking no questions at all, but simply seeking to increase the appreciation on the part of the reader). But, as David Daiches says, there is a great danger in relegating critical discussion solely to the highly specialized technical expert—the professional critic. A civilization, and an artifact as an embodiment of that civilization, can best be judged by its amateurs not by the professional experts who tend to develop a technical jargon of their own to place themselves in an indispensable position between the creator and the ordinary reader.

For an amateurish appreciation, an ear for words to go rapturous over the rhythmic beats, a capacity for wondering at the difference in the way the artist has perceived the subject that he himself has failed to do, and an ability to identify the various elements of which a work is composed are enough. With this stick his journey through literature could be as rewarding as a visit to the Grand Canyon and would help save him from the perils and hazards of an adventure on the crutches of the professional critic.

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