

## Growth of a Poetic Mind: A Glimpse into the Poetic Journey of R. Parthasarathy

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### Abstract

With the publication of 'Rough Passage', a new voice is set up in Indian English poetry and he is none other than Rajgopal Parthasarathy. With his thirty eight sequences divided into three parts namely 'Exile', 'Trial', and 'Homecoming', he shows how he is trapped into the labyrinth of colonialism with his mind tortured by his borrowing speech and self-betrayal. His dreaming of England as his future home, his later disenchantment, his feeling of alienation from his own culture and his feeling of sudden humiliating impotence on finding in a dilemma, find poignant expression in his single poetic collection. He is caught between two cultures and two languages and he tries his level best to come to a point of assimilation of these two languages and cultures. In this paper an attempt has been made to capture his poetic maturity and growth, a journey from alienation to rediscovery.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Exile, Passage, Growth, Journey.

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### Introduction

Like other autobiographical poems, R. Parthasarathy's 'Rough Passage' is accepted as a classic by his readers and critics within its five years of publication. This is really a volume where one can find not only his poetic creation but also his poetic growth, development and maturity. His poetic personality and his ultimate realization of poetic philosophy can be noticed in this volume. The poet here is found in a kind of double bind as this volume expresses the emergence of solely indigenous and living verse. This volume not only shows the poet's struggle to find his root but also his confrontation with his inner self and his eternal fight to overcome his pain of national and personal inadequacy. All the poems in this volume are structured in the exile-trial-homecoming framework. His demanding necessity of creative faculty and in his recognition of truth and falsehood make his struggle a positive one. Throughout the volume one can trace his mind tossed by guilt, regret and loss with a hopeless and total bondage condition. But with the passage of time he has recovered himself with his poetic faculty and creative mindset.

The whole discussion is very clearly pointed or rather suggested by the poet himself in his title of the book. This book conveys the message to the reader about a journey full of hardships and obstacles, a journey to reach a place of security and rest and also a journey of continuity of efforts leaving behind complacency of completeness. In his preface of 'Rough Passage', the poet says, "By revision and elimination-so that more than one text of the poem exists- I have at last composed, but perhaps not completed it. 'Rough Passage' is that book. It should be considered and read as one poem. In its twenty year's writing has finally settled." (Parthasarathy, 9) And the book transports a story of the poet's passage which is tortuous and rough. It is rough because the poet is caught in a dilemma like other bilingual writer. Although he finds at ease in England but he finds this medium of expression incompatible. His love for the Tamil culture and language create obstacles for him. But in course of the journey he finally succeeds to reach at a point where he reconciliates these two extreme pulls- the pulls of English and his mother tongue. But in course of that, he has to undergo certain scars on his mind and his heart produces a

pungency which finds place in his poetic art and all these make this volume a worthy one.

The three parts of the book 'Exile', 'Trial' and 'Homecoming' are nothing but the corresponding images of the poet's personal journey which consists of his life full of absurdity, extreme humaneness, his quarrel with it and finally his ultimate philosophical acceptance of this life. His past and present is blended beautifully in this book. Throughout the journey he develops a bitter disenchantment towards English language leaving his euphoristic attitude. But his search for identity advances him to a particular point where his peculiar attitude merges with his changing poetic development. And this development is actually the development of a particular situation which later emerges as his verses and he portrays it with fidelity and utmost care. What integrates these three sections into a unified one is his over powering consistent mood of disillusionment. This journey from growth to maturity shows how the poet is alienated and attracted from the world of meaning, value and essence. But his involvement and detachment from his own language and culture finally attribute to his knowledge as a true poet. Perhaps in this case he can be compared with Ramanujan and Kolatkar and his aesthetics are also depicted in a similar way like them.

Due to his extra-sensitiveness, Parthasarathy is ambivalent throughout this volume. He looks disillusioned after accepting culture, life and language with inflated expectations. But certainly his disillusionment and alienation give him objectivity and makes his passage a rough and tortuous one. He becomes a sufferer but at the same time a creator and philosopher. In this volume one can notice his relationship with the passage of time as he is found moving forward with time and starts to resist and rediscover himself against this time also. In his 'Exile', he projects a glorying contrast between his Tamil culture and English culture. He realizes that in England he will always be a foreigner in terms of culture and language. He says, "Exile, the first part opposes the culture of Europe with that of India, and examines the consequences of British rule on an Indian, especially the loss of identity with his own culture and therefore the need for roots." (Parthasarathy, 74)

In his 'Exile', he shows how the impact of West creates a change in India and his poetic growth can be found from the very beginning. Here he projects his past thirty year's life and his mistakes and experiences. At the first poem of this section, one can see the poet's efforts to encounter with his exile condition:

"As a man approaches thirty he may  
take stock of himself  
not that anything important happens.  
At thirty the mud will have settled  
You see yourself in a mirror  
Perhaps, refuge the image as yours." (Exile)

But he also states that his previous knowledge proves futile as he is going to commit the same mistake. He seems conscious about his condition which is pitiful and which is going to lead him into a world of alienation and void. Here the poet uses the word 'You' to denote his Tamil past. He says here:

"Experience doesn't always make for knowledge  
you make the same mistakes.  
Do the same things over again.  
The woman you may have loved  
You never married. These many years  
You warmed yourself at her hands." (Exile)

Like Michael Madhusudan Dutta, he dreams of foreign language and tries to acquire it. But it is not so easy to adopt a language which is not his own mother tongue and it seems he is not properly breathing in that atmosphere. Loneliness, alienation and solitariness enraptured him and his dreams are shattered. A kind of dystopia he creates there. He realizes that he very much requires the company with his Tamil language and he starts to miss that. He says:

"There is something to be said for exile  
you learn roots are deep  
that language is a tree, less colour  
under another sky." (Exile)

In this process he includes several images and metaphors to explain his idea. In his 'Exile: 1', one can find the poet standing by the side of a river metaphorical in nature which actually is the river of time. Here he realizes himself as a man away from the flow and from himself. He notices himself lost in the noise of a city. In his 'Exile: 2', he also projects the similar kind of view with images of contradiction. The city he describes is a symbol of impotence, drabness and non-significance and the night signifies love. Here his poetic maturity begins to grow. Here he projects himself as a tourist who fails to adopt a new land. A kind of disenchantment is shown here:

"Standing on Westminster Bridge  
it seemed the Thames had clogged  
the chariot wheels of Boadicea to stone.  
Under the shadows of poplars  
the river divides the city from the night.  
The noises reappear,  
of early trains, the milkman,  
and the events of the day become  
Vocal in the newsboy." (Exile)

Parthasarathy's sense of exile becomes more vivid after visiting many cities. In his 'Exile:3', the poet is seen as a wanderer who has the capacity to apprehend the beauty of the cities that he visits but he can't relate himself with that beauty. He is shown to move from town to town, city to city and country to country. One such poem is there where he describes Bombay:

"The streets are noisy, and trees  
of Malabar Hill blind with dust.  
Spring had gone unnoticed  
except for the fountains of colour in the park.  
Like a hand at rest, the pelagic city  
is immobile. Between us there is no commerce." (Exile)

He is in such a desperate condition that he questions himself. He wants to know what he is doing here for so many years and what he has achieved here. He is in a dilemma as he accepts the rejection from the other country and he wants to return to his own country. He says:

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

He tries a lot to build a bridge between the East and West culture. He finds it necessary to make a connection rather a link so that he can get rid of these uncertain feelings of insecurity and alienation. In a certain poem he mentions a link of his cultural past with the sharp contrast to crisps, stout and cigarettes. But he fails to a certain point to break that boundary rather the cultural wall. This can be traced in these following lines:

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

In the second section of 'Rough Passage', namely 'Trial' he continues to revolt against this dilemma and the absurd condition of his mind. Here one can signify the poet's effort also to understand the necessity of love which can help him to regain his root and which holds forth the promise of embedding and belonging. He states that to attain that piece of mind he has to free himself from exile and he has to look forward towards his own Tamil language and culture to attain a new creative self. He says, "Trial represents my tentative attempts to know and understand love between man and woman. Images of direct perception preponderate: eyes, hand, tongue and tactile, auditory and olfactory sense vie with another for an accurate rendering of undifferentiated experience." (Krishna, 269) To some extent in his 'Trial', he expresses his love and in this case Brijraj Singh's comment is worth mentioning, "his love poetry conveys the whole range of feeling that his remark suggests, from the ecstasy of transcendence to the drugged, mindless trance of passion, to the feeling of being cleansed by sex, to the

poignant bitter-sweet memory, to the anguished sense that doom cannot be staved off.” (Singh, 68)

His poems in this part are dominated by a sense of mockery and regretful wryness. Here he projects the cruelty of time and some basic challenges of life which is caused by transience and above all the fear of death. So disappointment, despair, darkness and gloom dominate the poems of this section. William Walsh aptly comments in this case that, “Disappointment, is his principal theme, whether the edgy complications of love, with the insoluble problems of poetic composition or with England in face of the actuality of what he expected.” (Walsh, 116) In the very first poem of ‘Trial’, he is in a fear and he feels down and low as if he is contemplating death. He says here about his mortality:

“Mortal as I am, I face the end  
with unspeakable relief,  
knowing how I should feel  
if I were stopped and cut off.  
Were I to clutch at the air  
Straw in my extremity,  
How should I not scream?  
I haven’t finished?  
Yet that too would pass unheeded.” (Trial)

Here in this section his poetic growth and maturity are shown to some extent as he finds something to contemplate and something to cheer. He is too much serious about his love. He wants to be united with his beloved once and they both need it rapid and urgent. As the poet says:

“Under the heavy lens of noon  
passion, quicker than candles,  
burns, smoking the glass of our bodies.” (Trial)

His poetic development is shown when he tries his best to recreate his childhood days with a mood of cool calm recollection. He is found in a mood looking at his family album, “Over the family album,/ the other night,/I shared your childhood.” (Trial) But he is also known to the fact of mortality and transitoriness. Actually the poet comes to a point of realization after the touch of love and at the same time the reality makes him melancholic. He says here:

“Love, I haven’t the key  
to unlock his gates.  
Night curves.” (Trial)

But he finds himself again in a kind of dilemma because he tries to rejuvenate his disintegrated self and the same time his vain efforts to adopt the foreign language. In the words of Vasant Shahane, “On another-may be on a rather superficial level-Trial detracts the self’s attempt to explore. The seminal emotion of love between man and woman for which the language is undifferentiated experience itself.” (Shahane, 128) The poet feels sorry after reminding his past and now he is cut off from his relatives and friends. He is thinking about the death. As he says, “Everything disfigured vision:/stones of the day turn phantoms.” (Trial) He is even not properly in a condition to love as a feeling of despair, darkness, gloom and fear of death cross his mind. He says here:

“Tonight I breathe on your skin:  
It clouds over. Soon it will reflect  
nothing.” (Trial)

Development of a poetic mind is reflected when he starts to realize the mortality of body and eternity of soul in case of physical and spiritual joy of love. He is in a dilemma as conflicts bind him in chains. He realizes the philosophy of life, the ultimate reality of death, his growing age and eternal growing pleasure out of physical love. He says: A knock on the door:/you entered./undressed quietly before he mirror/of my hands. eyes/drowned in the shell/as flesh hardened to store.” (Trial) Actually all these conflicts are arising from his exiled condition and he later tries to relate all these. He realizes that after leaving his own native culture he becomes misfit and impotent in his own country with his adaptation of English culture. He looks like a person devoid of love and becomes alienated. He says once:

“School was a pretty kettle of fish:  
the spoonfuls of English  
brew never quite slacked your thirst.” (Trial)

He wants to make a connection between his past and his experiences in love to make a connection between these or to attain a peace of mind. But to some extent his love experiences and joys seem to be a remote past and he uses the image of umbrella to explain this. As he says: “I have put aside the past/in a corner, an umbrella/now poor in the ribs.” (Trial) Sometimes he becomes philosophical and wants to raise a battle against the onslaught of time. He realizes that in his condition of exile and alienation love can only bring momentary joy but it will not be everlasting as bodies are perishable. And oneday his love and he will be turned into dust. He says:

“Overwhelm the flight  
of human speech. Thus celebrate  
something so perishable, trite.” (Trial)

With the passage of time he realizes that it is very hard to change his past and his efforts to find a home in his beloved’s heart proves futile. Bitterness of the past circles his heart and an acute sense of guilt conscience and remorse begin to oppress him. He says: “Curled around me/and not the familiar arms/ but an octopus past, blurring/the plate-glass of my days.” (Trial). It becomes impossible for him to escape from the suffering of his devastating past and he is bound to bear the wounds given by him by his past. In some lines he wants to express his agony and pains. As he says:

“I confess I am not myself  
in the present. I only endure  
a reflected existence of the past.” (Trial)

Actually he becomes successful in finding some faults in his past towards the end of his ‘Trial’ and for these reason thoughts of ending his life becomes more prominent. He tries hard to remake his past and that is why he says: “My past is an unperfected stone/ the flaws show. I polish/ the stone, sharpen the luster to a point.” (Trial). So it is very much clear that he wants to redeem his past by indulging into love. But these

attempts also prove futile and this ultimately leads him to his next section 'Homecoming'. Regarding 'Homecoming', the poet says: "Homecoming, in particular, tries to derive its sustenance from grafting itself on to whatever I find usable in the Tamil tradition. Something that had eluded me over the years, I was eventually able to nativitize it in English-the flavour, the essence of Tamil mores." (Trivedi, 56)

In the beginning part of 'Homecoming', the poet feels the heat as he finds it difficult to assimilate English language with his indigenous Tamil culture. He realizes that only home can give him what he wants as he fails to find a better place than home. Finally like Michael Madhusudan Dutta, he realizes what he has done till then and therefore urges to return back. As the poet says:

"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)

In this section he wants to embrace his own Tamil culture and manners. A poem from this section shows the family reunion and mores of Tamil tradition. He says that only with this tradition he is able to feel the ecstasies of the harmony and the meaning of a happy family life. Indians is bound to find in Indian English poets and the poet is no more exception. He says:

"this year, Cousins arrived in Tiruchchanur  
in overcrowded private buses  
the dust of unlettered years  
later, each one pulled,  
sitting cross-legged on the step:  
of the Choultry, familiar coconuts  
out of the fire  
of rice-and-pickle afternoons." (Homecoming)

Actually he wants to do something now. Fired by his imagination, he wants to rediscover his roots and remake his own identity. He realizes that it is impossible for him to live a happy life without the freedom for expression. So he decides to turn back to his own language leaving behind all despair and defeat. He yearns for the glory of Tamil which will definitely give him joy and homely atmosphere where his feelings and emotions will naturally find expression. So he realizes the need to write poetry especially in his Tamil language. Here are the lines that show the development of Parthasarathy's mind. He says:

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

### Conclusion

So in the three sections he shows a gradual poetic development. In his 'Exile', he describes his own pitiful condition where he is isolated and alienated after leaving his own Tamil culture. But in his 'trial', he wants to seek solace in his love. But his love proves to be a failure as he is unable to

erase his dreadful past. But in his 'Homecoming', his poetic growth and maturity comes to a full circle where he realizes what he has done and what he has to do in future. His poetic maturity is clearly visible as he realizes the differences between the foreign language and his own language. It was required for him to return to his place in order to rediscover his root and identity. It can be said that probably his return to his home symbolize a clarion call for all the Indian English poets who are leaving their home and linguistic cultures and traditions. The poet admits the fact that, "even though I am Tamil speaking and yet write in English, there is the overwhelming difficulty of using images in a linguistic tradition that is quite other than my own." (Parthasarathy, 7) So the poet's mental growth comes to a point where he realizes that it is not possible for him to shun himself from his own language and embrace foreign language. He finally decides to embrace his Tamil culture as it is the best medium through which he will be able to recall and remember things which belongs to him. The concluding lines will be the best example of his evolving poetic maturity and development:

"To live in Tamilnadu is to be conscious  
everyday of an importance.  
There is the language, for instance." (Rough Passage)

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