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Poetics and Politics of Reading K.

Satchidanandan

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Abstract: K.Satchidanandan is a renowned poet and critic and a recipient of many prestigious awards. As a colossal literary personality and a globetrotter, his political and ethical sensitivity is conspicuous in his poems. The paper focuses on his theme and treatment of poetry and how it incorporates and critiques the modern individual's diverse selves and the power politics of various institutions in the global realm.

Key Words - polyphony, identities, global citizen, metaphor

K. Satchidanandan is arguably the finest poet writing in Malayalam. He was one of the pioneers of modern poetry in Malayalam and is well known for the subtle and nuanced articulations of socio-political contexts in his poetry. The major characteristic features of his poems that the critics have noted, are narrativity, irony and philosophical contemplation on the contradictions of existence. Commenting on his first collection of translations in English *Summer Rain*, the poet Jayanta Mahapatra said: "These are poems of great strength and power, a moving tribute to the generation in which we live."

The title poem of K. Satchidanandan's collection by Sahitya Akademi, *Misplaced Objects and Other Poems*, suggests a fundamental error that introduces us to life, or an error-inducing life that establishes a fatal law, not within us but within our relationship with life. In the beginning, when we begin to misplace things, the intense anxiety of recovery haunts us. But soon we learn, this tendency to misplace is written into the script that relates us to the world. The poem suggests that this story of misplacement comes from a forgetting that never forgets the poet. But it is also a forgetting that makes him, as much as it makes us.

In another poem, simply titled 'Objects', Satchidanandan uses the motif of personification, implying objects ooze human characteristics but show more humane traits than human beings. Human beings, the poet says, are "extensions of objects", extended objects, who have introduced behavioural and moral errors into the world.

There are three poems that establish a sort of consort, drawing the poet's relationship with speech and writing. In the poem 'My Language', the poet confronts an initial violence and bewilderment that brings him to language. In the woods, in dreams, and other strange spaces, the poet merely recognizes alienness, until, from unexpected corners of the universe, his mother-tongue, Malayalam, spoke to him with reassurance and made the world intelligible and comforting.

'The Poet, to Poetry' is caught in the problem of differing directions of intentionality between the poet and his craft. Poems refuse to comply with the poet's anxiety to control them and turn out to be waywardly independent of the poet's attempt to fix their mode of being. If the poet asked the poem to deliver water to the dying man, it set fire to the killer's house instead. If the poet sent the poem "to propagate revolution" the poem "mourned the betrayed martyrs". Commanded to "preach detachment", the poem "roamed the streets

singing lovesongs.” This contrary attitude of the poem frees it from the claims of intentionality and grants poems their own free agency. For Heidegger language acts as a disclosure of being by ascertaining a correspondence between itself and being. But here the poem concludes that being dwells in the house of language. Language does not originate in being in Satchidanandan’s poem, but rather is born elsewhere. But the poet in Satchidanandan doesn’t let language get away with its impudent freedom. In the end, he inflicts an uncomfortably psychic and quasi-moral demand on the poem asking it to confess. The poem is finally made to stand in the confession box. But there is an interesting twist that the poet has already hinted that he may be either “the speaker” in the poem or “the spoken about.” The poem can only confess the poet’s private deeds. Language, born elsewhere and coming from elsewhere, is however trapped in the story of being.

In the third poem, ‘Stammer’, Satchidanandan discovers stammering as a deflection in language. He receives inspiration to write this poem from the late Communist leader EMS Namboodirippad. He clarifies in the beginning of the poem: “Stammer is no handicap,/ It is a mode of speech.” stammer can be considered an error built into language. “Each time we stammer,” writes the poet, “we are offering a sacrifice/ to the God of meanings.” God, who created language and hence poetry, is also a stammerer. Human stammering is then a translation of God’s. There is no escape, in Satchidanandan’s view, from the error, however pure, of origins. He questions the notions of purity and disability too.

It is evident from the poems Satchidanandan will find himself being attentive to the least celebrated beauty on earth. While poets run for roses and lilies, he chooses the cactus, and sings of its resilient, difficult beauty. “Thorns are my language. / I announce my existence/with a bleeding touch.” Or he chooses the mad, and identifies that crucial element that sets the mad apart from the rest: The way the mad live in a time they count differently, that makes them see differently the things we see, as they live another world in this world. If the way to a Tao temple is ridden with don’ts, in tune with the Buddhist path of negation, the way leading to Irom Sharmila is filled with an affirmation for her suffering, as it is only from recognising that suffering the poem draws its own hope to live on. And no one other than Gandhi teaches the poem, humility. Again when the poet attempts to draw maps as a child, countries get misplaced on the page and it sounds less dangerous than history playing with geographies. There is a conversation with the European avant-garde when the nude descends a staircase as in a Duchamp painting. There are many other memorable poems on the self, on nature’s law, on beauty, on speedy loves crushed like roses on city streets, on journeys of unexpected findings to Hampi and Shillong, and on the memory of dead writers and friends.

K. Satchidanandan in conversation with Amrith Lal B says:

I mark my passage
With words that smell life
— That’s All

In an interview with poet Satchidanandan “Kavithayude Navumaram” on 14th July 2016 in Mnorama News, he says: “The freedom of expression of a writer gets more spaces in social medias, but it makes a difficulty in choice among the readers. He also talks about the impossibility to define the borderline of poetry and the inability to write poetry without hurt anyone in the present-day context which make writing more painful. Beyond political parties, he stands for democratic ideals and defines the Leftist ideology as not the view point of a particular party, but a culture which stands against the fascist and the autocratic power politics; that supports the eco-friendly and sustainable development; and that believes ‘the power to the people’. He also warns us against the culture of consumption and self-centredness and the taker culture which is quite recurrent in the highly educated society day by day that makes the campus inactive.

In an interview with Arun Lal B in sahapedia, he calls the poem ‘Ezhuthanchan Ezhuthumbol’ (When Ezhuthanchan Writes) ‘a strange tempest of poetic creativity’. One particular strand in that poem is the question of justice. This is recurrent in other poems like ‘Pani’ and ‘Satyavangmoolam’ also. One of the later poem ‘Tree of Justice’ also imparts a larger idea of social justice. The departure from the ’70s’ poems— ‘Oduvil Njan Ottayakkunnu’ [Finally I am Alone], where the poet speaks about people talking about revolution without compassion in their hearts. That was the time when the People’s Cultural Forum had broken down and the Marxist-Leninist movement itself was split.

In the introduction of *Indian Poetry: Modernism and After*, Satchidanandan points out that in his study of poetry, he has developed two approaches: an ontological one where modern poetry seems to be constantly shifting its concepts of identity to larger class, gender and regional-linguistic identities and a complex sociological one where poets faced with the forces of standardisation brought about by the market society and its consumer culture seem to be forming imagined communities as in the case of Dalits or women (vii – xviii).

In *While I Write (Jnaan Ezhuthumbol)*, the poems show Satchidanandan as a romantic with surrealistic tensions. “Sulekha” is one of the best poems in the collection and remarkable for its sensuousness and

evocativeness. The poem is written in memory of his college-mate who died of cancer. "With so many wings, Sulekha, what are you doing there?/ The white robe of a divine bride, white rose, white dreams: I see everything." The poem contains powerful sensuous imageries like "scent of the rain-drenched soil", "fragrance of intense springs", "smile of glass" and "the pungent smell of burning corpses". The poem also warns the readers about the world in which we live by stating "even sunflowers have claws and fangs here" (4). The poems in this collection are appealing, imaginative, and felicitous.

"About Poetry, About Life" Satchidanandan defines poetry: "it is not mere combinatorial game. It raises up from the ocean of the unsayable to name the nameless and to give a voice to the voiceless". Poetry differs from prose . . . in its power to dissolve paradoxes and its way of imagining things into being and connecting words and memories" (xvii).

In an interview with Dr Mícheál Ó hAodha Satchidanandan says: "My insane grandmother taught me to create a parallel world to escape the vile ordinariness of the tiresomely humdrum everyday world; the dead taught me to be one with the soil; the wind taught me to move and shake without ever being seen and the rain trained my voice in a thousand modulations." The poem "Granny" also begins like this,

My granny was insane.
As her madness ripened into death,

.....
wrapped in straw. (1)

The poet uses the tool of self-mockery as a weapon to criticise the modern individual who is caught between diverse forces of capitalism and commodity consumer culture as "monkeys with teeth of gold" here. The mad occur in many of his poems. The poem "The Mad" begins like this:

The mad have no caste
or religion. They transcend
gender, live outside
ideologies. We do not deserve
their innocence. (43)

It is a critique of the existing tradition and the socio-political and cultural systems which defined the abnormal and the deviant as against the normal to fulfil their vested interests. The poet convinces at the end of the poem "The mad are not /mad like us." He reminds us of the madness in our thoughts regarding religion, caste and creed which still exists in our society as a dynamite awaits blasting.

"Loving a Woman" is a poem which is a critique of the existing tradition of the concept of "love" and the poem employs the powerful imageries of physical love making which is devoid of loyalty and sincerity and overruled by sexual passion and lust. It also alludes to the legend of Ahalya who was turned into stone after she was deluded into making love to Indra. It was only the touch of Rama, after millenia, that resurrected her. Finally, the poet asserts that "I have never loved a woman".

To love a woman is
to exchange the harshness of your muscles
for the tenderness of a flower, (26)

"The Nation of Birds" is a critique of the present-day rules and restrictions of citizenship and raises the question of global citizenship too. In the opening lines, the poet recognizes the features of the nation of birds. It has "no borders" and "no constitution too". It contrasts the man-made nation with strict geographical borders, security forces, judicial system, governmentalities, institutional structures, civic duties, responsibilities and the fundamental rights and the age-old customs and practices. The citizens of the nation of birds can fly, their wings are its flag. The poets are also citizens of the nation of birds, since they can fly with their imaginary wings irrespective of the borders around them. In the context of democracy leans towards autocracy, monologism tends to win and produces monopoly over meanings. The poem warns: "Nation is a cage" which gives protection and food for its citizens for their human power. If it seems to be worthless, the nation will haunt and torture them both physically and mentally. It is quite true in the present-day suspension and censorship enforced by the nation through social media upon the individuals.

Wolfgang Kubin has best summed up: Satchidanandan "is a poet on a journey. Poetry for him is a cry against all walls [. . .] It is his cosmopolitanism that makes Satchidanandan interesting beyond India" (www.poetryinternational.org). Writers like Dostoevsky, Kazantzakis, Herman Hesse, Tarashankar, William Blake, Alexander Blake, WB Yeats, Lorca, Neruda, Tagore and Kumaran Asan influenced the poet deeply in the way in which they combine beautifully their awareness of man and society with poetry. He tries to explore subaltern spirituality through his poetry and a multi-directional movement within the poetic scene in general, and a polyphony within specific poetic texts, resulting from the multi-modalities of existence which moves against all forms of standardisation natural to consumer societies.

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