



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Literature

KUMARAN ASAN - POETIC DISCOURSES IN RENAISSANCE AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

KEY WORDS: Esoteric mysticism Bhakti movement Bodhisatvas Renaissance Bhasha tradition interiority

Karunakaran B Shaji

Asst.Professor DESSH, RIE, Mysore

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a socio-political and historical analysis of the major poetic works of Kumaran Asan, one of the most influential poets of Malayalam. It can be seen that in Asan two distinct streams of influence are at work. Arguably the most perceptive influence on the poet had been that of Sree Narayana Guru, Social Reformer, Scholar and Poet. But at the same time, the proactive role that Asan took over by challenging the upper caste hegemony too left its mark on his poetry.

INTRODUCTION

The historical and socio-political realities always leave deep imprints and often wreaks havoc with the collective unconscious of the individual who is infinitely subjected to perambulations over a period of time. The same forces and perceptible currents and themes often leave their impact of the artistic self in a different way. It may range from abstract expressions of dissent to emblematic participation in acts of rebellion and retaliation. In certain exemplified instances, it would find resonance in esoteric mysticism, spirituality and even protracted rumination on renunciation. The poetic lore of Kumaran Asan one of the best known poets of Malayalam literature offers complex images of these images of dissent, distrust and rarefied spheres of spiritual quest.

Sree Narayana Guru

The most perceptible influence on Asan had been that of Sree Narayana Guru, social reformer, poet and thinker whose life and work has no parallels in the history of Kerala. The relentless zeal with which Guru unleashed the wind of radical social reformation, challenging and upsetting the stronghold of the caste edifice, abetted and refurbished to Sankara centuries ago, has been almost unprecedented in the Indian scenario, though minor versions and variations of which could be traced in Bhakti movement in South India and similar strains of dissent and revolt elsewhere. Though greatly confined to the geographical space of Kerala, the depth and intensity of Guru's movement bears comparable analogy with that of Buddha.

In a perceptible counter offensive to Brahminical authority, Guru revived forces and themes of folk Hinduism to mobilise the dormant energies of Ezhava community, Dalits and other downtrodden and marginalised people. As the trusted disciple of Guru, Kumaran Asan was vested with the responsibility of organising the SNDP Yogam, which he discharged dutifully even as he constantly reminded himself of his poetic vocation. Instead of visualising these as dissociated and conflicting ideas, Asan eminently succeeded in fine tuning and synthesising these turbulent themes. He discovered the ways whereby conflicts could be synergised to the complementaries. Soon the results manifested themselves as one of the most creative phases in the poetic career of Asan, the instance which perhaps are having some parallels in P.B. Shelley, the English Romanticist.

Kerala matchless achievements in social and educational reforms owe a great deal to Sree Narayana Guru and some of his illustrious contemporaries. Asan drew the reformative zeal of his poetry from these movements which had begun to shake the very foundations of society. But with the themes of revolution alone no one has ever created great poetry. Poetry has to literally transcend the considerations that make revolution earth bound. It is here the perceptible streams of interiority begins to underline the prime motif of Asan's poetry.

Encountering History

In Asan's poetry there is hardly any explicit representation of the social reality which he was asked to witness and participate. These

turbulent social realities transform the poetic aesthetics of the poet into something transmuted often found to be at variations with the spirituality that is waiting at the other end of the spectrum. Through the tales of transformations and transliterations that his characters are subjected to undergo, the poetic credo begins to discover an ethos that sometimes begins to resemble compassionate Bodhisatvas politely rejecting the mystique of enlightenment in their empathetic concern for the fellow suffering humanity.

It is here that discernible strategy wherein the poet begins to profile the social critique of the character caught on the cross roads of a historical milieu makes himself available for the moment of self-revelation leading the trauma of spiritual crisis, quest and consequent transformation. A Buddhist metaphysic seems to be at work. If there is an abiding principle of spirituality and metaphysic that overwhelms the poetry of Asan, it is essentially one of the sentient compassionate Buddha-hood. His poetry reveals strains of an emancipatory impulse of the radical forces that begins to mark their presence in the underbelly of the society.

Attempts to place Asan's poetry against the National perspective, though commendable is replete it with its own set of issues. M.Govindan suggests the remarkable strains of contrast existing between Asan's poetic output and those of Rabindranath Tagore, Iqbal, Mahjoor, Subramannya Bharati and Padumaipithan. Though the poetic brilliance and ingenuity of Asan may be greater than some these contemporaries, the essential lore of his poetry has to be seen against the specific socio-political milieu of Kerala, which was on the throes of a radical reformation during those times.

Journeys in Search of Self

Asan's all major poems are concerned with a self exploration and revelation, leading onto a kind of enlightenment, corresponding to which there is a critique of the contemporary social scenario. The mode of plotting will begin to reveal the dynamics of his vision. The energies unleashed by the social movements of the time have their corresponding echo in the poetry of Asan. Always there is the brilliant fusion of an emancipatory impulse of social reformist movement and the rarefied spaces of poetic aesthetics. A high degree of interiority characterises the poetry of Asan during this period. It could be attributed partly to the profound spirituality and mysticism of Sree Narayana Guru and partly to poet's reading of the Buddhist metaphysic.

The cultural signature Asan left behind in his society owes primarily to the social reformation unleashed by the sheer verve and silent sagacity of Guru. It has been critiqued through the radical Renaissance zeal that was beginning to reveal itself as a result of the efforts of his Guru and the like minded community of leaders who joined the ranks of his enthused volunteers. During this time Asan pioneered a separate Bhasha tradition in Malayalam. When all his major contemporary poets like Vallathol Narayana Menon and Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer take their lineage from the upper caste social order, Asan's underprivileged subaltern status gave his language a power and edge, which had an ameliorating charm

with the mainstream poetic traditions. It was the rare instance of listening to the voice of the voiceless and that voice carried the power of sublimity and conviction.

The cultural assertion of identity that Asan made in his society has its roots in the movement of social reformation inaugurated by Narayana Guru, which in turn has to be examined against the socio-cultural and historic dimensions of Kerala society of those times. It would be impossible to understand the regionalised complexities of Indian caste system from an outsider's perspective. It is so infused into the socio-cultural and historical fabric of Kerala which has been exclusively seen from the perspective of the people who are caught in its harrowing reality. It primarily as 'exists and functions as a regional system' (M.N.Srinivas, 1987, 3). Because of its explicit and implicit territorial implications, the members of the caste are vastly confined to the territory that is holding them. Asan's poetry provides a graphic representation of the issues of the social mobility of his characters.

MARGINALISED VOICES

Asan ventures into an exploration of the issues of the people weighed down, ostracised and excluded from the mainstream life both in his social and poetic life. It is interesting to note that his life as a poet and activist are complimentary if the numerous editorials he wrote, the speeches he made in the legislative council, book reviews, as well as in his letters and memorandums. The interventions he made in the Kerala society is a pointer to this fact. By 1805, the British had near complete success in bringing most of the princely states of Kerala under their control. It is estimated that there were more than 220 castes in Kerala during this period. The British who could not have an insider's reality of caste system left it to itself, while embarking on a series of administrative reforms. So there came into an existence a rather paradoxical relationship between social dynamics and political reality.

The historical fact is that 'caste became the colonial form of civil society; it justified the denial of political rights to Indian subjects (not citizens) and explained the necessity of colonial rule' (Nicholas B Dirks, 2003, 16). The total significance of the historical intervention made by Narayana Guru will be understood if it is examined if the juxtaposing of caste as a category in the colonial context and its validation as well as political suppression.

Guru made a scientific as well as an intuitive analysis of the social fabric and found that the caste and religion are poles apart. The vast elite facade of Hinduism pays only scant regard or pretends criminal ignorance of the lot of the downtrodden people of the lower castes, who themselves are seen under the unsentimental label of Hinduism. When religion is mostly preoccupied with a quest for the self knowledge, which could be an intensely subjective state of things, whereas caste is a political statement which can be systematically used against a people who are perpetually doomed to live a marginalised survival. It becomes a relentless tale of exploitation of a hapless people who are rarely let into moments of self-introspection, let alone self-awareness. The consecration of the idol of Siva at Aruvippuram was the most audacious act which sparked off a silent revolution whose powerful tides have not lost their brilliant sheen even after the passage of a century. It had been the most vociferous manifestation of the historical need to revive the sagging morale of the vast sections of people who had never been into the hallowed space of self-knowledge and wisdom.

Guru trusted and expected his protegee Asan, to disseminate this spark of awareness to the people who were desperately looking for that. In the perceptible strain of Asan's poetry this theme of social reality and commitment is too obvious even when apparently scaling heights almost unprecedented in the whole gamut of Malayalam poetry. Asan's arrival on the scene of Malayalam poetry coincides with tumultuous events in history of Kerala. It was the time of rising historical conflict between the aggressive enterprise of the upper classes to exert control over institutions of power and the fierce resistance of the marginalised communities to resist it. Asan took over the mantle of the spokesman and vociferous champion of these masses who were traditionally confined to the sidelines.

A New Aesthetics of Poetry

Under the radically changed circumstances of confrontation and conflict it was necessary to invent a new poetics that would accommodate debate, discussion and the invocation to revolt against injustices. So the plots and human players have to be refashioned. The shallow substance of the old poetry sedated with themes of eroticism, devotional and balladic heroism had to be wiped clean to make way for the new aesthetics of poetry. It had been the unparalleled fusion of zeit-geist and individual genius of the most remarkable poet of the century.

The publication of *Veena Poovu* (The Withered Flower) in 1909, marked off the beginning of new aesthetics, with it numerous dimensions of internal debate as well as the philosophic and mystic rumination elegantly supported by the synergy of astonishing similes and metaphors. From his unsympathetic critique of Vallathol's Chithrayogam, it is evident that Asan had a troubled relation with the literary traditions of the day. He condemned poems of similar sort which had no relationship with the lived reality of the people. It was natural for him to abhor the cultural exclusiveness of closed communities as he derived the inspiration from the masses who had no access to the facade of elitism, the prerogative of the upper castes.

Caste confrontations had become a regular feature of the eighteenth century, as the upper classes were disinclined to shed the prerogatives they enjoyed purely because of their claims to superiority. The end result of this ego trip had been the deprivation of the last figment of humanism. Ayyankali (1863-1941), the Dalit leader and scholar was in the forefront of this strife against the caste oppression which often amounted to perpetration of physical violence. Asan used the platform of *Vivekodayam* to refer to the caste riots. In one of them he sardonically comments that at least through physical indulgence in violence, men could remain the oblivious of untouchability for the time being. It could be prime motif behind Asan's obsession with the ironic treatment of touch, which is capable of bringing about a transformation and thereby transcendentalism in the participating actors. The emerging critique could be spotted in the works of Kunchan Nambiar whose pointed sarcasm and ironic understatement served as a powerful social commentary.

VEENA POOVU

The institutionalising attribute of caste and its consequent tendency to turn into agent of self destruction is stated subliminally in *Veena Poovu*. The narrative space of the poem discovers the interior space within language. The ruminative attribute of the poem withdraws the reality from body to the self. In the interweaving spaces of desire, memory and prospects of death, the gentle note of transcendentalism sets in, releasing the static body into world of agitated momentum. The strain is faithfully continued in *Karuna* (1923), where the haunting gentle reminder of Upaguptha is ricocheted in the guilt ridden conscience of Vasavadatta, the courtesan of Mathura, "It is not the time yet". The ephemeral temporality of body and its destructive temptations is richly suggested in both poems.

We encounter the characters of Asan and the poetic discourse they engage in at the crossroads of history where the time stands still for a moment, paying heed to the passion and intensity of the debate that is set in motion. The narrative of contingency and crisis becomes too imminent and immediate to be ignored. The self begins to undertake a journey that is involuntary and autochthonous. The facades of history which is built upon fabled folklores of manufactured mythology and elitism is demolished compelling one to perceive the dark core of the unadorned truth and self. Asan's poetry attains this marvellous feat in all in unassuming demeanour.

Thus Spake the Buddha

The Leif-motif of both *Chandalabhikshuki* and *Karuna* seems to be resurrection and reclaiming of the soul and self from the repressive caste epidemic. The poet seeks to subvert the internal dynamics of poetics to attain this. In this poetic dialectics, Asan ensured the participation of the traditionally oppressed classes, the dynamics

of a people who were ultimately on the throes of discovering themselves and human dignity that was denied to them till the day, and a minority from the elite upper classes who were too willing to join the forces change and radicalisation. It is essential to note that the apparent elements of Sanskritization in his poetry should not be mistaken for aping the neo-classical models, but a forbidding effort to usurp the Brahminical authority and discourse in poetry. He could not be blind to the fact the Brahminical hierarchy could be humanised only through the acts of transgression and subversion. Thus Asan transformed a historical context into an effective forward movement by containing, transfixing and transforming all inherent elements of contradiction.

Many of the poems of Asan, including Chinthavishtayaya Sita (1919), offer extensive internalised debates on the power structures and their wallowing apathy to the human predicament. In this acclaimed masterpiece, the poet takes recourse to a retelling of Ramayana from the perspective of Sita. Even as she is traditionally eulogised as the ultimate embodiment of feminine virtue and chastity, in this solitary rumination, the reader is let into the torn self of the much tortured and abused self of a woman. She is presented as a hapless victim of a governing system which is authoritarian and patriarchal to the core. It is the assertive state of the woman who wakes up finally to discover her authentic self that ultimately encounters the male tyranny. In the subversive poetic imagery the entire power structure is exposed through meticulous act of deconstruction. Sita's waking consciousness is presented in terms of the fire imagery. Her body is embroiled in coils of flames richly suggesting her passionate workings of her consciousness. Through crisis of Sita, poets is richly suggesting the inescapable paradox of power itself.

Karuna is an adaptation of a Buddhist tale from Bodhisatvapadana Kalpalata. Vasavasatta, the lascivious courtesan is enamoured to Ananda, the wandering Buddhist mendicant, who keeps on endlessly dissuading her passionate appeals with a prescient 'It is not yet time'. The courtesan's fate takes a volte face and plummets to the nadir as she is implicated in a crime of murder. Nemesis catches with her as she lies mutilated by the King's executioners in the graveyard awaiting her imminent death. Poet precisely chooses this moment for the meeting of the Bhikshu and the courtesan. Her final moments in the presence of Upagupta turn into a journey to the self.

Vasavadatta's incurable temptation to indulge perpetually is suggested by the opulence of her mansion. Like a romantic odalisque, she could be reclining on the sinfully soft, perfumed pillows on her couch. This forbidden indulgence will have its inevitable poetic justice and retribution towards the end of the poem when she is lying dismembered in the funeral ground surrounded by dreaded and horrible images of death and decay. It is difficult to miss this eerie note of parallelism and contrast running through the chequered career of the courtesan.

Perhaps the most forbidding task for the reader is difficulty in comprehending Vasavadatta's passion for Upagupta, the penurious mendicant, something that goes against her kernel. But the poet offers the cryptic explanation by commenting that even those who mindlessly gorge the sumptuous fare to their fill will not be able resist the temptation for exotic delicacies. The desire becomes an end in itself for Vasavadatta, rather than a worthwhile means for a further cause. Desires are often resting on the promise of self contributing instead of fitting into a definitive schemes of social framework of reference. Here the poet is subtly suggesting the Buddhist principle of abstention and sentient compassion which is alone is capable of curing an indulgent life of its maledictions. Desire endlessly ensnare the subject in cyclic patterns from which there can be no easy way out. In a powerful pointer to this truth, the poet by introducing a trader who arrives 'with scarlet silk cloth frilled and tucked up' and a 'golden girdle encircling the waist outside'. It should not be missed that in world poetry, including that of T.S.Eliot, silk has been employed as the ultimate metaphor of luxurious and sinful acts of indulgence. While letting herself overwhelmed by these themes, the mystic ethereal radiance of Upagupta might have instilled the momentary craving for the transcendentalism she must now usher into her life.

Landscapes of Soul

The terrifying grotesque images of the graveyard in the second part of the poem are juxtaposed against the luxurious interiors in the first section. This pattern could be spotted in many poems of Asan like Nalini, Leela and Chintavishtayaya Sita. The poetic strategy here is the subversion of the optics of desire as the imagery of colonising ambition and predatory characteristic of authority. The intense gaze of Upagupta shatters the brittle structures and exposes their meaninglessness. Asan with his romantic sublimity leads the claustrophobic self indulgent confines of feudal luxury to the luminous world that is waiting to dawn in. The individualist fantasies of possessing the world for itself is replaced with the all inclusive self of communal reality, which offers political alternatives to hegemonies of the earlier world. In the real life one may not able these dualities poised against each other often, as they tend to disseminate into each other's space. The artistic self of the poet is engaged in a never ending process of exposing the vacuity of this apparent illusions. With remarkable acumen and vociferousness, Asan reveals the possibilities of the ultimate realisation of this ideal.

In Asan's description of the gloomy weird landscape that serves as the backdrop of Vasadatta's last moments in the burial ground, he is reaching or even excelling the classical masters. Endless stretches of unforgiving landscape of inhospitable wasteland on the sandy banks of Yamuna punctuated with overgrown Palmyra trees. Along with it is spotted giant peepul tree 'swaying like a gigantic graveyard ghoul with flames on its head. Adding horror to the scenario, jackals and vultures can be seen feeding on half burnt bodies and pieces of bones 'shining white like broken conch shells'. By the side of the dismembered dying Vasavadatta a grieving woman can be seen scaring away rooks by waving a peepul twig. It is the perfect painting of this landscape that adds to this part of this part of the poem, its ineffable charm.

CONCLUSION

This scene which is a visual assault to the finer sensibilities is intended as a clear contrast to the beginning of the poem, when Vasavadatta was reigning supreme in her mansion of ultimate indulgence like a queen. She is simultaneously an object and victim. Her desire to meet Upagupta could be part of her unstated desire to transcend the world of mindless indulgence. Asan cunningly sets the musical cadence of the poem to the rocking rhythm, considered to be one of the most enchanting and haunting strains of music in the world. The mendicant is employs the metaphor of river to convey the flux of time: 'The river flows at times full of mud, and at other times, it becomes pure and clear. Your time is not unlimited, you who are sensible should not give yourself upto to pain and grief in vain' (374).

In the presence of the monk, the courtesan is transformed. Her moment of death and enlightenment coincides in all its infinite compassion and beauty. But more than the transformation of an individual, a vaster scheme of things seem to be emerging at the end of the poem. Upagupta epitomises the universal light capable of transforming the lives, providing them the knowledge that till the time remained unavailable to them. The knowledge dawning beyond the last crystal reaches of sunlight.

REFERENCES:

1. Asan, N. Kumaran 1995. *Asante Padyakritikal*, Thrissur: Current Books.
2. Balakrishnan, P.K., 2006. *Narayana Guru: Oru Samahara Grantham*. Kottayam: D. C. Books
3. Sanu, M.K. 2003. *Asanthiyilinnu Santhiyilekku*. Kottayam: D. C. Books
4. Shaji, K.N. 2002. *Narayana Guru: Jeevitham, Krithikal, Darsanam*. Thrissur: Current Books.