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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture: 31 Gopi Krishnan Kottoor

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Socio-Political Conditions

- Humans grapple with daily-life problems, suicide, disease, death, poverty.
- Alienation, corruption, and dissatisfaction.
- Confessional Poetry has taken a new form today. It is impersonal.

Confessional Poetry

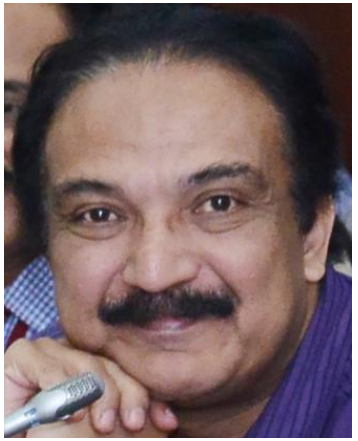
- American Confessional Poets
  Robert Lowell, Silvia Plath, Anne Saxton, etc.
- Sensitive, emotional and personal
- Pain, rage, fear, guilt and other suppressed emotions are addressed.
- Rebellion against emotional or social bondage.
- Indian Confessional Poetry
  - Kamala Das and others



Confessional Poetry

Introduction to the Poet

- Born in 1956…., Trivandrum, Kerala, India.
- Education at an English Jesuit College
- Master of Fine Arts (Poetry) program of the Texas State University, Southwest Texas, U.S.
- Poet-in-Residence at the University of Augsburg, Germany, (2005) on a sponsorship by ICCR in association with Tagore Centre, Berlin.
- The pen name of Raghav G. Nair
- Poetry journal *Poetry Chain*
- “A Cut in Jade” (about the struggles of bringing out little magazine)
- Won several awards: All-India Special Poetry Prize of the British Council, Poetry Society, India, All India Poetry Competitions (AIPC) in 1997.



Poet, Playwriter, Novelist

Kottoor's works

- *Piccolo*
- *Milestones to the Sun*
- *Sunbirds in the Rain*
- *Nirvana and Other poems*
- *Rev: Father Benedict Goes To Heaven and Other poems*
- *Father, Wake Us In Passing (2000) ,(Vater, Wecke Uns Im Vorübergehen – German, Laufschrift 2004)*
- *Mother Sonata*
- *A Buchenwald Diary (Poems following a visit to Buchenwald Concentration camp, Weimar, Germany)*
- *Victoria Terminus, Poems Selected and New*
- *Vrindavan – The Coloured Yolk of Love (2012)*
- *Tell Me Neruda (2014)*
- *The Painter of Evenings: New and Selected Poems (1980-2018)*

Characteristics of Kottoor's Poems

- Avoids being sentimental and confessional
- Often talks about death objectively
- Candidly satiric
- Voices contemporary feelings.
- Focuses on the abandoned truths of life, which must be reflected upon for the sake of understanding our life better.
- ' a poet who has discovered his own voice distinct from that of his ancestors or his compeers." -Ayyappa Paniker

Characteristics of *Father, Wake Us In Passing* (2000)

- **Translated in German by Wolfgang Heyder in 2004 as Vater, wecke' uns im Vorübergehen'**

- **18 Parts: "**Frost", "Cry", "America", "Telephone Call", "Intensive Care Unit", "Nectar of the Gods", "Lone Ranger", "Blue Petals", "Gethsemane", "Gift", "ICU", "Rocks of Calvary", "The Colours of Pain", "Angels on the Moon", "China Roses", "Pigeons", "Sea Crabs", "Wedding Night", "Magic Sleeper".

Father, Wake Us in Passing (opening lines)

"Frost"

This is not in memoriam
This is not an elegy
Look, I've come
I've come across the seas for you.
I've cried alone in single rooms
To forget the last frozen look in your eyes
While I climbed the plane.

“Gift”

I have now set out to do the things
You loved most about me.
About a gift called poetry.
Never wrote like this before,
Perhaps, never again must.
Writing about pain,
Is cruel.
I have set about writing,
What you perhaps would most love me to do
Write about you.

I am doing that, father.
But it is a kind of way neither of us
Dreamt we would ever do;
For you hold my hand
And I write on.
Though you cannot now lift your little finger,
Through me,
You flow.

“ICU”

If I must see you, father, again,

I must peep in through the glass hole of the ICU.

Our second home.

How many such homes do we have to cross?

I go back to your room.

Sit by your empty bed,

Where your dog sleeps by your mattress

Wondering where you have gone.

I must go to mother
To pasteurize her tears.
Read together ‘The Buddha and
The Mustard Seed’.
I must open the Bible
Heavy with hammerings,
Driving iron nails
Upon Golgotha
Past midnight.

“The Colours of Pain”

Your body, the reminder
Of an Auschwitz clip,
Your flesh that covered me once
In fine cool flannel
our mouth that called me son
Now sealed off and banded to make room
For the ventilator.

“Magic Sleeper”

This morning, they brought you out on a bed on wheels.

I called out to you to wake up.

It was as if your red eyes that opened, blood-nipped,

Was a third eye of god.

Did you try to move them across to me,

The tiny boats of our sad living, caught among the reeds?

Do you hear me? Do you hear?...

Be our magic mountain, magic sleeper,

We’ll keep our lesson,

That pain is all the treasure we have here on earth.

Go back in now.

We’ll wait here where we said, we would.

We’ll keep our word for you.

Come back,

And wake us, in passing, in paradise.

Analysis of Poems

- Long poem written when his father was in coma and was dying.
- ‘Man’s plight and affliction that stem from his finite existence on earth’
- Emotional: ‘Pain is in the poem’
  - ✓ ‘Broad spectrum of highly dramatic emotions’
  - ✓ Raises his father’s suffering to a sphere of supra-personal significance
- Comparison of the Father in ICU to Christ
- Use of Biblical allusions:
  - Gethsemane,
  - Golgotha,
  - Rock of Calvary

Contd…

- The depiction of his father’s disease and wounds
- Records of conversations with doctors and nurses
- Reports on scenes from family life and how it is affected.
- Final journey into the infinite: Relationship of father with the metaphysical



Characteristics of Poems

"*No psychological arrangement for a late patricide, no literary attempt at treating old sores of childhood. On the contrary, amidst the world of intensive care and high technology medicine, a son sets about singing his dying father's praises in words and images*."-

Martin Langanke and Christine Marendon, *Closing Statement*.

“USG”

The doctor says,
‘Try and keep her happy,
Satisfy all her wishes’.
A farewell mounts bright purple
On the ultra sound scan.
Along her bed we light camphor,
And let her fall back in amber.
As I watch her,
her stare quickens.
In her eyes break,
The falling ice of the Himalayas.

“The Arrival”

Today is the day
you said you’ll come.

In the lotus pond
are two blue lotuses.

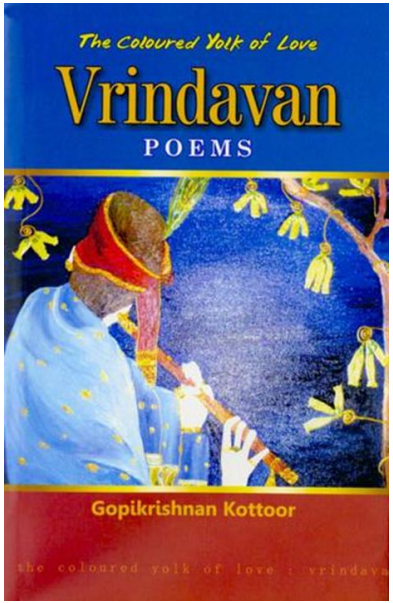
On the other shore
the bangle maker I see
calls me. ‘Radhae,
I have brought blue bangles
all for your hands…’

In the afternoon grass
I see the wild blue snake.

Upon the wet tuft
a chameleon dries in the sun,
turning hydrangea blue.

All, blue, Krishna.

Is that All...?



“The Departure”

The next time you come,
Krishna, you won't have to search for me
in Brinda, no, not even in Brasna.
Trace me
back to your blue feather.
Wading in Radhamrith,
as you hold my hand
and lead me
and we fall
in love
galaxy,
upon
galaxy....

radhea-radhe -radhae -krishna-krishna-krishna-krishna-radhae

Contd…

“Captive in your heart”

Captive in my heart
I'm quiet.
I know your reasons
1001.
I taste your flute,
the bamboo smells,
your breath-song
that is mine.
Captive in your heart
I watch the clouds pass.
nothing more
I'll say,
Nothing.
Dew over you,
I'll stay
captive in your heart,
set
free.

“How can I Show You, Krishna”

How can I show you, Krishna,
all my secret pores
where my love for you hides?
The gopis, they’ll all laugh.
Even you will be amused.
how can I show you, Madhava,
all the sad places
where my love for you cries?
Even you will shed tears,
But if you really want
to know them all,
disrobe your bright pitambara,
come under the Yamuna.
There, break me,
take it all.

“Is Love Just The Body?”

Is Love just the body, beloved?,
is your love just my body Krishna?
or is it Radha, formless lightning?
is it you? Your blue body
warm as the kingfisher's feather
untouched by every water?
What is love?
is love soul,
bereft of the thirsts of longing
or our bodies entwined
in the night ooze of the senses,
among the dipp'd blue lotuses
Tell me,
Am I, the flute, Radhae
is the flute me?
Don't you remember me with every note,
though you are the song
that pours and pours?
So, love must be, must be
when you can't just tell
the body from the soul.
Where the colours of the rainbow
prism
colourless
there flows love.
With me in you,
you and me in me,
you in me
me and you in you,
when you open to me
as your eyelids close,
there's just our togetherness
turning divine,
steadfast as moonlight
upon calm Yamuna
in unassuming celestial
flow

“The Coffin Maker”

The coffin maker is a happy man now.
More and more orders keep coming in.
Soon he'll able to marry off
his daughters who have just attained puberty
and keep pretty Angela happy
on condoms strawberry flavoured and chocolate ice.

Of late he painted his house bright chrysanthemum red
ordered teakwood beds and never cared a damn
what the neighbours said. Atop his showroom
the great catlights came on
and his name glowed in the dark
whenever passing lights hit it.

Contd…

Now he's not wondering any more,
he knows he's the best in town.

What about air-conditioning? That would lengthen
the life of coffins. Now he's struck with a bright new idea
that would revolutionize coffin making for
all time. Electronic remote-controlled polymer coffins
with micro chips and inbuilt flash units
that brought home to your PC screen
your dear dear dear departed along with up to date
information on the state of decomposition
that you could activate or slow down
much like a video-game.

Contd…

Now whenever he kneels down with Angela
to pray,
he can only think of this
no one else can help him raise such funds
so hi-tech
which of course secretly meant
more and more accidents, causalities, fatalities
of course work was worship, it didn't matter what you did
you just had to put in your best, there could be no wrong asking

“My Daughter Reports A Senior's Suicide”

Why dear, I ask her.
In my mind, somebody fallen in love
Has been jilted.
But things are simpler.

‘Her parents had strange diseases…..'
That baffles me.

I think of AIDS, of nothing in particular,
But drift to the silent body
Of a young girl, and her puberty,
Laid among the freshly done roses.

Don't lose focus dear, I tell her,
And end the conversation with
a telephone kiss.

Back in my mind, a young girl,
The poison she ran to,
Lips gone cold, on thresholds of beauty,
And a mind cut inside salted flesh,
Baked in sprouting alphabets of love.

On the Process of Poetry

"I feel that process of poetry is like blood running in the body. The body does its function. Poetry for which you are ordained is doing its job all the while for you whether you are aware of it or not. I let it. The poetry runs within, taking resources from all around and stirs it with emotions of all kinds. The poet is only the outlet, the medium. When the trigger comes, poetry bleeds."

(Kottoor in an Interview to Arvind Nawale)

Critical Comments on Kottoor's Poetry

- Gopikrishnan Kottoor's poetry comes of age in this sustained polyphony of his own voice: His poetry in the making gushes forth as the floodgates open. There's no letup in the intensity of the pain or in the intensity of the poem... . The lines break into a splendour of silver and gold. -Dr. Ayyappa Paniker.

- Late Niranjan Mohanty's *Krishna* was on a slightly different pitch. It was not so detailed nor so long in describing their intense intimacy. Here the poet goes to even very small details. The procession of events include 'early spring in Vrindavan' Kamdev's plight, mango season, golden willow, Jasmines et al. Radha is 'filled up' emotionally and physically. The body and soul could never be seen in isolation. (Sitakant Mahapatra)

- Kottoor's poetry is powerful and touching. The use of everyday language, strong visual imagery, and controlled pathos, make the volume distressing, and therefore, effective poetry. (*Chandrabhaga*)

Summing up

You are not to me
A token for fame.
Erase my name.
I'll still make love to you.
I don't want to be
What you don't want to give me.
I want to give you
All I have.
I'll lay down my life for you
I'll lay you down
Like a fresh body.
All lavender smells.
All awake and risen.
And how much I love you
That love knows Not itself,
Such love
That I want you
That I must no longer come
With you
So even in death
I'll not turn
To sleep,
Poetry,
Union of you and me,
I'll not turn to
Sleep without you
But I must have Always had you Naked
Beside me,
Half clothed,
The other side. (Poetry)

Thank You

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