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Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 34: R Parthasarathy

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Ethnographic Voices in Indian English Writing

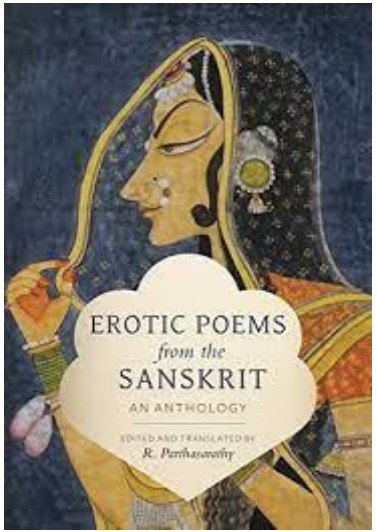
- They write about a particular region, culture or linguistic tradition.
  - Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao from Northeast India & Jacinta Kerketta from an Oraon Adivasi community
  - Jayanta Mahapatra from Odisha and R. Parthasarathy from Tamil Linguistic tradition.
- They show their concern for local culture, identity, and language.
- Images and themes are drawn from their indigenous culture.

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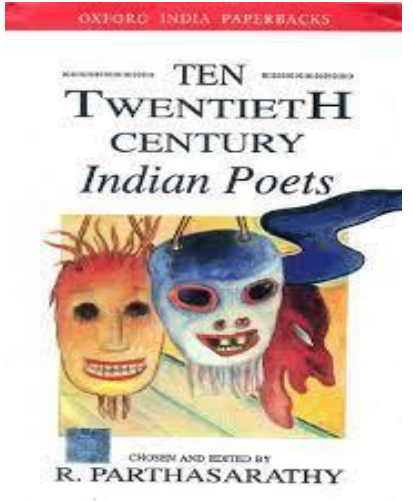
- Major elements of their writings include memory, past, nostalgia, distinctive identity, regional problems, cultural history.
- “Themes and imagery utilizing ‘local knowledge,’ folk traditions, nature, and contemporary social issues are characteristic of many poems produced in the respective regions.”
- They are beware of the decaying of their local identity because of globalization, colonization or neo-colonialism.
- Cultural expression is the key element.
- May also deal with biculturalism.

R. Parthasarathy

- ✓ Rajagopal Parthasarathy was born in 1934 in Tamilnadu in a Brahmin family.
- ✓ Joined Oxford University Press in 1971 as the Regional Editor of Madras region.
- ✓ Served as British Council Scholar at Leeds University, UK.
- ✓ Indian poet, translator, editor, and critic.
- ✓ Conferred with Ulka Poetry Prize of Poetry in 1966.
- ✓ A member of the National Academy of Letters, New Delhi.
- ✓ Professor of English and Asian Studies at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York.
- ✓ He received Sahitya Akademy Award in 1996.



His Literary Outputs

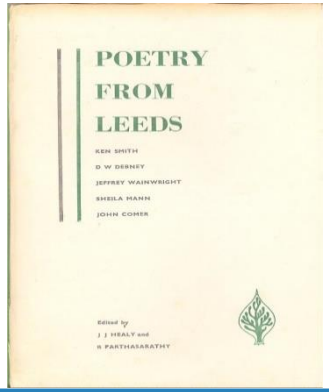


Poetry Collections

- ✓ *Rough Passage* (1977)
- ✓ *Poetry from Leeds* (1968)

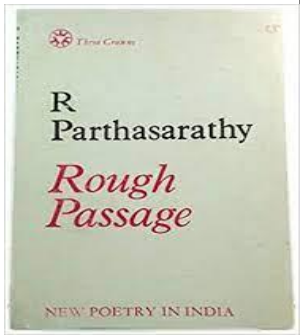
Edited Volumes

- *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets*



Translations

- ➢ *Erotic Poems from the Sanskrit: An Anthology*
- ➢ *The Tale of an Anklet: An Epic of South India*



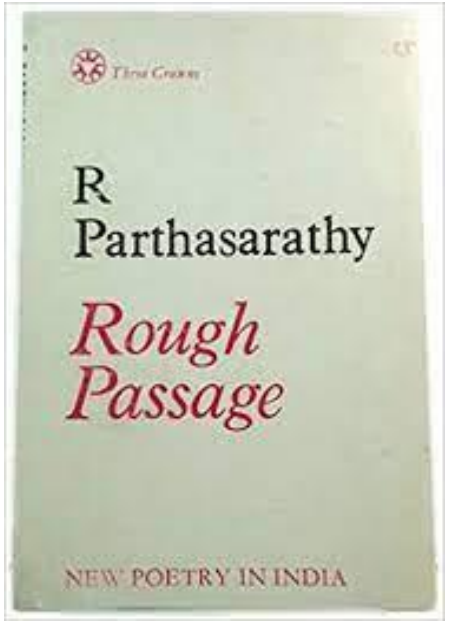
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He had spent his youth whoring
After the English Gods,
There is something to be said for exile:
You learn , roots are deep. That language
Is a tree, loses colour
Under another sky. The bark
Disappears with the first snow
And branches become hoarse. (From “Another Sky”)

“ English forms a part of my intellectual, rational make-up, Tamil of my emotional , psychic make-up.”

Rough Passage (1977)

- It has three sections- *Exile, Trial,* and *Homecoming*. It has 39 poems.
- It is a poetic autobiography
- Delineates his poetic experience.
- Elements of disillusionment and cultural conflict is there.
- Exiled within his own mind.
- Explores the alienation caused by the distance from own culture, tradition, and language.

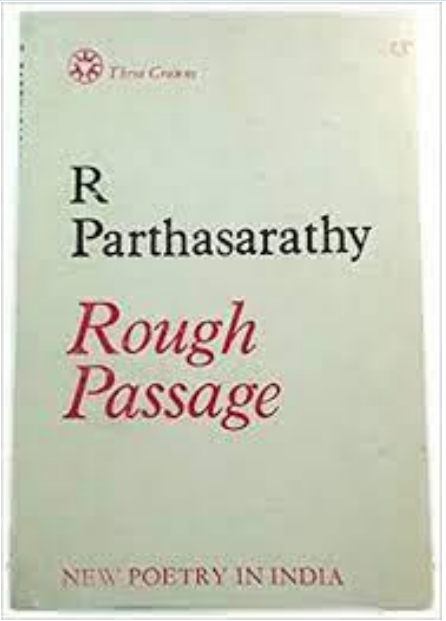


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- Love for his culture, mother tongue.
- Conflict between the Indian and the European culture.
- Element of sensuousness
- Elements of fragmentation and decaying values
- Dialogue with the past

“However, the most reassuring thing
about the past is that it happened.” (15)

“I have put aside the past
in a corner, an umbrella
now poor in the ribs.”
(*Rough Passage*, Lines: 64-66)



Exile

- Delineates his traumatic experiences in England.
- Shows the cultural conflict between the two cultures.
- Effects of colonialism on Indian society and Indian linguistic tradition.
- Dislocation, alienation, and trauma caused by this colonialism.
- Special focus on the decaying of Tamil linguistic tradition and culture.
- Feeling of dissatisfaction in India, as the condition is same.

The Angrez impudently rub salt
in our wounds. Our pride
bites the dust
still pullulate the decrepit ruins.
Now, blood trickled down
the Jamuna, while the Emperor
flies indecisive kites."

From *Exile*

Through holes in a wall, as it were,
lamps burned in the fog.
In a basement flat, conversation

filled the night, while Ravi Shankar,
cigarette stubs, empty bottles of stout
and crisps provided the necessary pauses.

He had spent his youth whoring
after English gods.
There is something to be called for exile:

you learn roots are deep.
That language is a tree, loses colour
under another sky.

The bark disappears with the snow,
and branches become hoarse.
However, the most assuring thing

about the past is that it happened.
Dressed in tweeds or grey flannel,
its suburban pockets

bursting with immigrants_
‘coloureds’ is what they call us
over there- the city is no jewel, either:

lanes full of smoke and litter,
with puddles of unwashed
English children.

Contd...

Standing on Westminster bridge,
It seemed the Thames had clogged
The chariot wheels of Boadicea to stone.

The years have given me little wisdom,
And I've dislodged myself to find it.
here, on the banks of Hooghly,

I must give quality to the other half.
I've forfeited the embarrassing gift.
Innocence in my scramble to be man.

Trial

- It is about the trial of existence.
- Love as a reality
- New responsibility of marriage
- Love as a key of purifying soul, a way to reach redemption.
- Also describes the complexities which come into the way of making love.
- In the moment of ecstasy, we forget our material existence.
- Not only celebrates soul, but the body also.
- Element of carnality is present there.

"A knock on the door:
you entered.
Undressed quietly before the mirror

of my hands. Eyes
drowned in the skull
as flesh hardened to stone."

From *Trial*

Over the family album, the other night,
I shared your childhood:
the unruly hair silenced by bobpins

and ribbons, eyes half-shut
before the fierce glass,
a ripple of arms round Suneeti's neck,

and in the distance, squatting
on fabulous haunches
of all things, the Taj.

School was a pretty kettle of fish:
the spoonfuls of English
brew never quite slaked your thirst.

Hand on chin, you grew up,
all agog, on the cook's succulent
folklore. You rolled yourself

into the ball the afternoon Father died,
till time unfurled you
like a peal of bells. How your face

bronzed, as flesh and bone struck
a touchwood day. Purged,
you turned the corner in a child's steps.

Homecoming

- Explores the phenomenon of returning of one's home.
- A dialogue with his Tamil past.
- Concerned with the decay of his Tamil linguistic tradition.
- Linguistic dilemma becomes the major part
- Reclaiming of past.

"How long can foreign poets
Provide the staple of your lines?
Turn inward,
Scrap the bottom of your past."

From *Homecoming*

I am no longer myself as I watch
the evening blur the traffic
to a pair of obese headlights.

I return home, tried,
my face pressed against the window
of expectation . I climb the steps

to my flat, only to trip over the mat
Outside the door. The key
goes to sleep in my palm.

I fear I have bungled again.
That last refinement of speech
terrifies me. The balloon.

" I now firmly believe that I should not write poems in any other language but Tamil."

Of poetry has grown red in the face
with repeated blowing. For scriptures
I, therefore, recommend

the humble newspaper: I find
My prayers occasionally answered there.
I shall, perhaps, go on.

Like this, unmindful of day
melting into the night.
My heart I have turned inside out.

Hereafter, I should be content,
I think, to go through life
with the small change of uncertainties.

Parthasarathy's Love Poems

1.

Under the warm coverlet my woman sleeps on;
I am drenched in the intractable scent of hair.
The notion has often crossed my mind;
I should crumple it up like a handkerchief
That I could press to my face from time to time.
Meanwhile wakeful hand peel the skin off the night;
I drink from her tongue in the drak.
Our breath tips the room over to one side;
The tight hardwood floor groans
Under the slew of discarded clothes.
We shut the whole untidy threadbare world out---
Dogs, telephones, even the small indifferent rain.

2.

As you untie your long flowing hair in bed,
It spreads over slowly and colours the sheets,
Leaving behind a pool of black
Caught in the red glare of the lamplight.
You turn towards me, disturbing the pool;
Hands and tongues lose no time in spinning their moist web,
And we fall into their delicate net.
Day breaks: the window empties its pail
Of light over us, waking us up.
It is our sweat now that colours the sheets;
It is the clean scent of your hair in the morning
That keeps me awake, and I am unable to rise.

(from *The Concise Kamasutra*)

General Themes and Characteristics of his Poems

- Representation of Indian ethos
- Sense of loss and despair
- Identity crisis
- Alienation from own culture and tradition
- Against racial prejudice and the imperialistic mindset
- Linguistic dilemma
- Cultural dilemma

Critical Views on Parthasarathy

- “Although Parthasarthy’s poetry is more openly autobiographical than Eliot’s, he edits and revises it to achieve an impersonal distance, through coolness of tone, regularity of form, economy of language, and by the juxtaposition of images which situate his own life in the context of the colonialism, the decay of the grandeur of the Indian past and the ossification of Tamil culture along with its accompanying modern vulgarity.” (Bruce King)
- It is a moot point whether the poet has been actually able to achieve all that he promised… a general impression of disjointedness… fails to be a national odyssey, it does have evocative passage recording a personal peregrination.” (M.K.Naik)

"My tongue in English chains,
I return , after a generation, to you.
I am at the end

of my dravidic tether,
hunger for you unassauaged.
I falter, stumble."

Thank You

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Naik, M.K and Shyamala Narayan. Indian English Literature, 1980-2000, A Critical Survey. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2021