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Modes of Water Representation: From Classic to Modern Indian Poetry

Abstract: To overcome the difficulty in representation, poets resort to certain images of the material objects which are readily available in the world around them. Water has been such an objective reality in the Indian poetry, from the classical periods onwards. But owing to the varieties of subjective assimilations, its modes of representation tends to vary in various contexts. Water itself was a unique experience for the people of each epoch and the images built around it was so numerous and various that it had the capability to convey the experiences of the particular era. When the poetic language becomes imbued with images and symbols that are newly constructed around this accustomed material objectivity, they provide the poetical manipulations, a plethora of symbolic representations with which they would unlock new realms of experiences. In the course of time they multiply themselves and new images and symbols are constructed around them and this process itself creates new material realities and new linguistic realms which are further utilized in the creation and appreciation of poetry. This paper is an attempt to ascertain the various modes of water representation in Indian literature starting from the classic literature and folk literature to the modern Malayalam poetry and Indian English poetry.

Key Words: Literary representation, aesthetic sensibility, poetic subject, folk tradition, material reality

Introduction: Literary representations are not only the manifestations of experiences at personnel perspectives, but realisation of a social process at subjective level and its appropriate expressions through a literary medium. The prerequisites of experiences as well as its expressions are linguistic in nature. Language and its various manifestations such as speech, writing, and literature are materialistic. The platforms for the creation and articulations of the language are objective world. Language functions at a subjective level also. But, the conceptual artefacts that constitute the various categories of the articulations of language are fundamentally materialistic. Depending upon the nature of the materials that are available to construct the realities of a given period and the modes of assimilation of those realities at a subjective level, literary formulations and their representations tends to show variations. The literary sensibility of a period is shaped by the nature of experiences at personnel and social realms, which are determined by the linguistic and material realities of that period. In the field of literary representations, it can be seen that the range of a literary concept is limited and determined by the material realities and linguistic attributes of a particular era.

The literary language is a special kind of language. It uses the words in a metaphorical sense which is distinctively different from its usage in the common speech. The meanings of the words are certain and uncertain; in the common speech we generally derive this certainty of meaning and in the poetic speech, the whole aesthetic sense rely upon this uncertainty or the ambiguous nature of meaning. In the general appreciation of a poem both the certainty and uncertainty of meanings come into play. Notwithstanding the numerous connotations that the words bring forward in its nature of non-fixity and uncertainty, the poetical appreciation (say in a classroom) generally premises on the belief that a particular reading of a poem at a particular historical time engulfs an array of meanings, within the limited literary languages that are available to the speech community which appreciate that poem. This often happens to

be a momentary arrest of certain range of meanings from the incessant flow of the unraveled fabrics of meanings of the words and their poetic constructions.

To convey the intensity of a particular experience in a specific context, the poets search for such words which can properly convey their meaning, and they resort to such constructions which can convey a whole sense of that experiences. In most of the genuine poetical attempts, the poet struggle to convey a new experience which might not have entered in the social language of poetic experience. But in his endeavour to communicate his experience, the poet invents new images, symbols and metaphorical tropes, that initially penetrates into the poetical language and then slowly percolates into the language and culture. This may be one of the reasons, why a genuine poetry of serious nature is accused of abstruseness and obscurity at its initial appearance, but get accepted in the due course of time.

To overcome this difficulty, poets resort to certain images of the material objects which are readily available in the world around them. Water has been such an objective reality in the Indian poetry, from the classical periods onwards. But owing to the varieties of subjective assimilations, its modes of representation tends to vary in various contexts. Water itself was a unique experience for the people of each epoch and the images built around it was so numerous and various that it had the capability to convey the experiences of the particular era. When the poetic language becomes imbued with images and symbols that are newly constructed around this accustomed material objectivity, they provide the poetical manipulations, a plethora of symbolic representations with which they would unlock new realms of experiences. In the course of time they multiply themselves and new images and symbols are constructed around them and this process itself creates new material realities and new linguistic realms which are further utilized in the creation and appreciation of poetry. This paper is an attempt to ascertain the various modes of water representation in Indian literature starting from the classic literature and folk literature to the modern Malayalam poetry and Indian English poetry.

Water images In Classical Poetry and its Folk Counterparts.

Personification of water was a trend of ancient literature. In the classic Sanskrit we have this form of water that has been assigned to handle a personal role. One of the personified forms is the potential cloud in Kalidasa's Meghasandesam .Cloud is nothing but a condensation of water.The cloud is made to carry the message of Yaksha who was penalised for several years of long confinement for an unwarranted love affair. M N Vijayan in his psychoanalytical reading of Meghasandesam interprets the cloud as the concupiscence of Yaksha (126). In the northern regions of India, rain used to be a rare event. Onset of the rain invigorated the libido of people. Vijayan's observations are noteworthy in this regard. "Kalidasa was able to project his own emotions over to the cloud. His insight was manifested through the visuals of the cloud. The peculiarity of the cloud that was seen by Kalidasa was its remoteness. The poets can project any feeling on to an object that is psychologically or visually remote from us" (126).

Contrary to the tendency of romanticising the representation of water in classical literature, Indian folk literature endeavoured to represent the reality of water in its essence as a daily need. In rural India, the reality of water possession is harsh and distressful. An eminent journalist, P Sainath's observations in this context is relevant: "We have several districts in India, that have an abundance of rain fall, still the poor suffer acute draught ,since the water resources are colonised by the powerful" (Everybody Loves a Good Draught. 319).

Folk traditions foreground the real human troubles and trauma caused by water scarcity. Their water poems are filled with their anguish against the denial of accessibility to the drinking water. One basic difference between classic and folk literatures is that the former shows the sensibility of the elite since it was patronised by the ruling class. Their hegemony over popular symbols of water was almost infinite. Lower caste people, rural population and the poor people- and in many instances these categories merge into each other – were the actual sufferers of the water denial. 'Water Bearing Maid' is a midcentury Bhojpuri folk song, where the pathetic

exertions of a housewife are delineated who was forced to travel miles to collect the drinking water. The narration is simple and straightforward. This poem is quoted in Kerala school syllabus.

If I walk a slow pace daily,
With the water pot on my head,
Child will keep on crying in home.
If I take a quicker pace then,
Spilling water shall wet my dress:
Well is narrow and so deeper
Pulling rope had, callused my palm.

Ladies and children walking long distances with water filled pots on their heads is a common rural picture in India. The scope of their life is limited with the daily routine of water bearing. Folk literature was the only resource which lent tongues to their experiences. The disturbing fact is that even after years of our independence and many of the planned projects, the condition of our rural drinking water facilities is still worse.

Water Images in Modern Malayalam Poetry

Kerala has been well known for its affluence of water. In spite of the presence of forty four perennial rivers and a quite comfortable annual rainfall, public availability of water and access to water resources is still not commendable in this state. In Kerala, an upper class sensibility regarding cleanliness was prevalent. Historically, this sensibility has been evolved by the material reality, that the full authority and control over the public water bodies actually rested with the upper castes. Higher caste people claimed to be cleaner than the lower castes. The insistence of ablutions to get rid of the sins afflicted by coming into contact with lower castes started as a Brahmin custom. Kerala Brahmins meticulously followed this custom and the feudal lords vehemently supported them. This is one of the reasons for having so many

ponds under the authority of temple administrators. Entry to these public ponds and access to public wells for the lower castes was restricted by law and social taboo. Ablution in the temple ponds was preserved as a cultural prerogative of the upper class. Lower castes and poor people were unable to financially afford a private bathing facility. At social level they were denied the right to use public bathing facilities. Moreover, the working fields of the poor, in most of the instances were muddy fields or other untidy backgrounds. The lower caste people were deliberately pictured as untidy and were made a subject of ridicule. Water denial was in this way a double edged attack on the lower castes- physically and culturally.

For Kumaranasan water was a revenge of the unprivileged. He found the power of water that could unite the souls. In his poetry water became an item that could flow from lowliness to elation. He built a bridge with the power of water between the castes. Water and caste disputes were related in our country .As per Sainath. P :“ water is a major element in caste and other disputes. The upper castes, who restrict their access to water at the best of times, shut it off completely when there is draught.” (351).

In ChandalaBhikshuki ,when the water provided by neechnaari (low caste woman) was drunk by the famous elite (Aarya), there took place a revolution .The Buddhist mendicant’s appreciation of this kindness bears testimonials to the elation of low caste maid’s status.

Oh! Holy maid, every droplets of this water that you pour
Might embellish your inner heart with countless holy garlands
(ChandalaBhikshuki 28)

Indian poetry of the Nehru era witnesses a shift from romanticisation. Indian aspiration to become a powerful nation was the prevalent spirit of the period. Enthusiasm of our national leaders provided verve and vigor to the poets. Many poems written by Vylloppilli Sreedhara Menon visualised this attitude through an anthropocentric outlook of nature. The message was very clear. All the natural resources were to be properly utilised for the progress of human

beings. A new realisation regarding the utilisation of rivers took birth during this period. River water is not to be wasted by flowing into bushes. It is the asset of the farmer. Farmer should get full share of water so that he reproduces it for the welfare of common men. One representative poem of this era is 'Jalasechanam' ["water Irrigation"]. Balaraman, elder brother to Lord Krishna is the protagonist in this poem. Dwaraka was undergoing a severe drought and the only feasible solution was to make the river to flow through the countryside. After receiving complaints from people about the waywardness of river Kalindi, he sets out with his huge plough in hand. He requests the river to flow as per the human wish. She arrogantly refuses his plea. The angry Balaraman with a heavy strike of his mighty plough dragged the river through the path he had drawn. In poet's view, it is not the exploitation of nature, but the utilisation of the nature for the common welfare of the people. Poet remarks that status of Kalindi was elated by becoming slave to the human ambitions." (118)

This poem was published in the year 1950 when Nehru asserted that the big dams were the temples of modern India. Our country was preparing itself the five year plans. The main focus of our first five year plan was on irrigation and agriculture. Undoubtedly, the aesthetic sensibility presented in this poem was formulated in the overwhelming nationalistic fervor of this period. The water images in this poem convey the sensibility of a postcolonial determination.

Aqua-Aestheticism in Indian English poetry

Though the language of literature is distinctively different from the language of communication, peculiar linguistic features of individual language influence the mode of representation in that literature. In the Indian context, English bears a special position against the vernacular. It has been a hegemonic language, since its introduction in India by the colonial authorities. Objective realities enrich the language with words and concepts and incapacitate it to be the medium for the articulation of the human experiences. Poetical images slowly

percolates in the common usage and becomes a part of the culture. The culture further provides the material for the expression of the experiences. This is a complementary process, both the creation of poetry and the elaboration of culture.

The position of the language in a society –whether native, foreign or a second language– itself plays a crucial role to determine the mode of representation. Ngugi's concept of language and culture reminds us that: "Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken or the written language. That is through a specific language" (Ngugi. 15). Indian English was designed by the British authorities as a medium to impart the English culture to the Indians through the way of English education. English education, which flourished in India also produced its own literature. Contrary to the notion of its perpetrators, Indian English literature attempted to sustain in a different manifestation by assimilating the Indian realities and involved as a distinctive literature along with the other Bhasha literature .

Indian English Poetry is an Indian genre of poetry that was born in the metro cities and nurtured by the English educated Indians. In its initial stage, it took the material objects from its Indian background and the literary concepts from the western origin for its growth. There is a combination of English spirit and Indian realities in the early Indian English poetry. The sensibilities of the metro cities and aesthetics of urban are the prevalent literary aspects of Indian English poetry.

For the early Indian English poets water is a nostalgic symbol rather than reality. They write more about summer; their experiences are marked with the scanty rain of the town. For mainstream poets like Nissim Ezekiel and Adil Jussawalla whose first language is English, water images are rare and bare. The ecology for them is constructed by the images of the townships. They enjoy their leisure time in public parks. Their children are vulnerable to diseases affected by new rain. So, they can easily start their early lessons by reciting an English nursery rhyme like "Rain rain go away/ Little Johnny wants to play..." Continuing

severe rainfalls may still be uncomfortable for a rural peasant family, but for varied reasons, they don't ask the rain to go away.

For many other poets with multilingual background, conventional as well as invented images are used for water representation. When talking about the commodification of our heredity, AK Mehrotra brims with water images: "Be careful, one river is still wet/and slippery/its water continues to run like footprints" (The sale 66). In the poem 'continuities' he writes "I bend down from the swaying bridge/and pick up the river/which once tried to hide me" (68). Sea is an image of the unpredictable human psyche for Kamala Das: "the sea shall bear some prying and certain violations/but I tell you, the sea shall take no more/ the sea shall take no more/" (The Invitation. 26). Prominent figures who use a plenty of water images include AK Ramanujan, R Parthasarathy and Keki N Daruwalla. In Ramanujan and Parthasarathy, river images are frequently represented as carriers of the identity and culture. Daruwalla's water images are numerous and varied and he uses them to analyse the mystery of life and nature.

'A river' is a memorable poem by AK Ramanujan. It raises a philosophical question. The indifference of the poets towards human miseries caused by the floods in Vaigai river of Madurai district is the concern of this poem. Ramanujan realizes that water is the aesthetical essence of a river. Water is the basic material which makes a river, 'river'. Devoid of water, the river is not a poetic object. Ramanujan endeavors to raise a very potential query regarding the function of poetry. It is an un-answered FAQ in literature, that between life and beauty which is to be chosen as the poetic subject; to put it in other words, the question is that whether the aesthetic sensibility is determined by the realities of life or vice versa?

For generations of poets, both old and new, the miseries caused by flood and drought had not been a poetic subject. As far as river Vaigai is concerned, the poet submits a reality statement- A dry summer and a harmful season of rain. The sight of the river in summer has been as dry

as the river for instilling a poetic imagination. “Summer dries it to a trickle in the sand,/ baring the sand ribs, straw and women’s hair” .Only when there is a flood, poets understands the beauty of river. He quotes the poets: “The river has enough water/ to be poetical only once in a year”. But what is the consequence? “ and then it carries away/in the first half-hour/three village houses,/a couple of cows/named Gopi and Brinda/and one pregnant woman/expecting identical twins”. Evidently, for Ramanujan, rivers are not an ideal place for romanticisation. He is harshly criticising the poetic tradition of indifference towards miseries, for the sake of aesthetic appreciation.

Parthasarathy also expressed his ecological concerns about river Vaigai of Madurai. For him, Vaigai represents the ancient Tamil culture. For the poet, river is the tradition and identity. Pollution of the river is the pollution of his identity. His painstaking view of the river, “Every evening, as bells roll in the forehead of temples,/She sees a man on the steps,/Clean his arse/..... She is become a sewer, now/no one has any use for Vaigai, river, once, of this sweet city/”(Rough Passages P 54) is a fact with any river in India.

In the “Trial “portion of ‘Rough Passages’ Parthasarathy utilises water images in a different connotations. Here it stands for the physical relations and their sensualities against the failure of relations in his exile period abroad when he was ‘whoring after English Gods’. On his native land, the poet is able to enjoy the sensuousness of relations as expressed in the lines: “It’s you I commemorate today/The sweet water of your flesh I draw/with my arms as from a well/its taste as ever/as on the night of Capricorn/”(Rough Passages 37)

K N Daruwalla is essentially a poet of landscape. His water images are mysterious but striking. He can continuously invite your attraction towards “the fields layered with water” and “The eyes drugged with willow and waterscape”. He would remind you about the spacial sense of water: “a sense of space,/ the sight of terraced water mixed with murky light “ or would draw a mythological metaphor like “The serpent-waters unwinding from their coils hiss in turmoil”

or would present a mysteriously beautiful scene like “The fugitive waters swirl/from the underworld/and course through” or would project a sensuous imagery like “I too struck home/and the waters of your body rose to engulf me.”(Ruminations at Verinag. 198)

Conclusion

As a poetic object and as a subject of poetry, water has been an inevitable material for Indian poetry, since water bears much ambiguity. Ambiguity gives ample of scope to become poetic object. Water is both a reality and the base for a sense of beauty. It can be safely stated that, the real life and poetic usage of water has helped to draw an aesthetic sensibility in Indian literature. The dynamics of this sensitivity is determined by the material realities of water. Aesthetic sensibility is also not static and keeps on transforming according to the material changes of real life. Life’s advancements may obliterate this scope of becoming an aesthetic object in certain cases. An item, say, moonlight has been an essential aesthetic object for many generations of poets. Moonlight becomes beautiful in contrast to darkness. But the invention of electricity and the commonplace availability of electrical light have eliminated the prowess of darkness and in turn it nullified the aesthetic value of moonlight. But predictably, the possibility of obliteration of aesthetic sensibility of water is negligible.

As a natural force, a life giving resource, a sensitive element in the religious ceremonies, an agent of both pleasure and pain, water keeps on influencing the life and art in this universe. As an object of beauty, not only its visuals forms as clouds, rains, slowly flowing rivers, ferocious oceans, but also its musical sounds, taste and touch have been providing an endless imageries to the poets and artists. Since water has been continuing to be an essential element of life, its realisation as an object of aesthetics may change, but would not exhaust.

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