Love as a Synaesthetic Experience in R. Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage*

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'Synaesthesia' is supposed to be the most complex but effective form of what is called 'sensuousness' in art and literature. Besides, synaesthesia is a medical condition, and it has nothing to do with I. A. Richards's concept of "synthesis", nor with the processes of perception explored in Gestalt psychology. Rajagopal Parthasarathy (b. 1934) is one of the most successful modern Indian poets writing in English to use the device with great ingenuity. In fact, Parthasarathy's fondness for the tool leads him to create a synaesthetic language itself for expressing the predicament of a modern man torn between home and abroad. Above all, employment of synaesthesia helps the poet re-define love --- love as a synaesthetic experience that relives him for the time being of the pangs of being exiled, though it is not eternal joy or everlasting love.]

> A poem ought to, in effect, try to arrest the flow of language, to anaesthetize it, to petrify it, to fossilize it. Ultimately, it is the reader who breathes life into the poem, awakening it from its enforced sleep in the language.
>
> --- Parthasarathy (11)

Whenever I read the oft-quoted line by Robert Burns: "O my love's like a red, red rose", I can hear a tribal beating his kettledrum accompanied by cymbals in a distant valley where the people feed on red petals, despite my disclaimer that I, despite my love for synesthesia, am not a synaesthete. **'**Synaesthesia' is supposed to be the most complex but effective form of what is called 'sensuousness' in art and literature. Etymologically, the word is a combination of 'syn' (together), from New Latin and 'esthesia', from Greek *aisthesis* (sensation or perception). Chris Baldick defines synaesthesia as

> "a blending or confusion of different kinds of sense impression, in which one type of sensation is referred to in terms more appropriate to another. Common synaesthetic expressions include the descriptions of colours as 'loud' or 'warm' and of sounds as 'smooth'. This effect was cultivated consciously by the French Symbolists, but is often found in earlier poetry, notably in Keats" (1259).

Besides, synaesthesia is a medical condition, and it has nothing to do with I. A. Richards's concept of "synthesis", nor with the processes of perception explored in Gestalt psychology. Diane Ackerman, a poet from Illinois observes in her seminal work *A Natural History of the Senses* (the section entitled "Synesthesia"):

> [……] Those who experience intense synesthesia naturally on a regular basis are rare -- only about one in every five hundred thousand people -- neurologist Richard Cytowic "traces the phenomenon to the limbic system, the most primitive part of the brain, calling synesthetes "living cognitive fossils," because they may be people whose limbic system is not entirely governed by the much more sophisticated (and more recently evolved) cortex". As he says, "synesthesia ... may be a memory of how early mammals saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched."

Opposed to "the equilibrium of opposed impulses" (197), that is contended by Richards as "the ground plan of the most valuable aesthetic responses", synaesthesia is a state of distraction.

Many a poet starting from especially Shelley and Keats, the first English masters of the device, has employed it to add to pleasure of poetry. Donne hears a "loud perfume", Crashaw a "sparkling noyse". Shelley perceives the fragrance of the hyacinth as "music"; Keats prescribes to "taste the music of that vision pale". "To the bugle every colour is red", writes Emily Dickinson. In George Meredith's "Modern Love: I", a woman's heart is found to "drink the pale drug of silence." Dame Edith Sitwell in her poem "Green Geese" writes: "The moon smelt sweet as nutmeg root/ On the ripe peach trees' leaves and fruit…"

Though the earliest extant of the use of synaesthesia in Indian poetry in English can be traced perhaps in Toru Dutt's description of the Semul's red flowers in her "Sonnet": "And o'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean, / Red, red, and startling like a trumpet's sound", Rajagopal Parthasarathy (b. 1934) is one of the most successful modern Indian poets writing in English to use the device with great ingenuity. In fact, Parthasarathy's fondness for the tool leads him to create a synaesthetic language itself for expressing the predicament of a modern man torn between home and abroad.

Written over a period of fifteen years (1961-1976) and divided into three parts "Exile", "Trial" and "Homecoming", Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* (1977) is a sequence of thirty seven pieces, chronicling the traumatic experiences of transplantation. In 1963-64 Parthasarathy had been working as a British Council scholar at Leeds University, which gave him a 'culture shock' (163), to use the words of Ramamurthy. In his autobiographical essay "Whoring After English Gods" he records:

> My encounter with England only reproduced the by-now familiar pattern of Indian experience in England: 'disenchantment'.
>
> (qtd. in Ramamurthy 163)

However, Parthasarathy's penchant for synaesthetic language is evidenced at its best in the second part "Trial". Celebration of carnal love is central to this part. To the poet exiled into a foreign country for long, life amounts to a sate of utter difficulty and, hence "Trial". And carnal love is a sedative antidote to the present traumatic state. To depict the excitement of physical love Parthasarathy uses a language, both sensuous and synaesthetic, that salvages his poetry from being reduced to gross sensuality.

Learning that "roots are deep" (*Rough Passage* 75) the poet, who had "spent his youth whoring after English gods" (ibid.), tries to mitigate his present agony by remembering the happy days of the past spent in company of his true love, i. e., Tamil language. Regarding the theme of "Trial" Parthasarathy writes:

> The second part, "Trial", written between 1961and 1974, celebrates love as a reality here and now. Against the turmoil of non-relationship, personal love holds forth the promise of belonging…….The impulse to preserve is at the bottom of "Trial".
>
> (qtd. in Sahu 79)

In section 1 of "Trial" the poet transmutes Tamil into a beloved and represents the relationship with its characteristic accompanying passion in terms of 'synaesthesia':

I grasp your hand
in a rainbow of touch.

(*Rough Passage* 78)

The metaphor "a rainbow of touch" involves not only a confusion of the senses but also a subordination of one sense to another. It is a touch-colour synaesthesia, the tactile image being expressed in terms of colour. The touch has a sort of prismatic effect in that the poet perceives seven colours by grasping her hand.

In section 2 where the poet goes down memory lane, flipping through the family album, the visual has been subordinated to the auditory:

"I shared your childhood:
the unruly hair silenced by bobpins
and ribbons, eyes half shut".

(*Rough Passage* 78)

As if, the poet, who has been listening to the rustling of her dishevelled hair through the sense of vision, is disappointed to find it stopped by pins and ribbons. The expression "a ripple of arms round Suneeti's neck" also baffles the reader. Has the poet got the arms with rippling muscles (i. e., muscles which look like ripples)? Does the poet mean that the touch of the poet's arms has a ripple effect on Suneeti's body? If we choose the second, then it would be the visualisation of the tactile since rippling is a visual image. English was never Suneeti's cup of tea; it could not provide emotional sustenance to her. The "spoonfuls of English / brew" never quite quenched her thirst of knowledge. Instead, her imagination was fed on folktales told by the family cook which were tasty and juicy:

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

(Parthasarathy 78)

The culinary metaphor involves an intermingling of the two senses - the sense of hearing and the sense of taste, the former being rendered secondary. She rolled herself into a ball the afternoon her father died but "time unfurled you / like a peal of bells." A precedent of this kind of transmutation of sensation may be found in G. M. Hopkins's poem "The Windhover": "High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing / In his ecstasy! Then off, off forth on swing". In Hopkins the reader can at once perceive that "[g]oing high up there the bird seems to have become a hung bell, as it were, ringing the glory of God"(27), to use the words of Prof. Rama Kundu, the kinetic/ visual being tempered by the auditory. So happens in Parthasarathy here.

Night helps the speaker to achieve a sort of privacy for lovemaking in section 7. In a paradoxical way the body of the beloved that had been dimmed by the harsh light of Time is now being recognised by the opaque lens of darkness:

It is night alone helps
to achieve a lucid exclusiveness.
Time that had dimmed
your singular form
by its harsh light now makes
recognition possible
through this opaque lens.

(*Rough Passage* 79)

It is here worth mentioning that Synaesthetes can visualise colour even in the dark places. To validate the paradox the poet, however, resorts to another startling use of touch- colour synaesthesia:

Touch brings body into focus,
restores colour to inert hands,

(*Rough Passage* 79)

How colour can be translated through touch is here exemplified by Parthasarathy. The correspondence between touch and sight is finely delineated in Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Sense* (the section titled "Touch"):

Touch, by clarifying and adding to the shorthand of the eyes, teaches us that we live in a three-dimensional world. [……]Touch allows us to find our way in the world in the darkness or in other circumstances where we can't fully use our other senses. [4] By combining eyesight and touch, primates excel at locating objects in space. Although there's no special name for the ability, we can touch something and decide if it's heavy, light, gaseous, soft, hard, liquid, solid. As Svetlana Alper shrewdly observes in Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market (1988), though Rembrandt often took blindness as his subject (The Return of the Prodigal Son, the blind Jacob, and others):

> **Blindness is not invoked with reference to a higher spiritual insight, but to call attention to the activity of touch in our experience of the world. Rembrandt represents touch as the embodiment of sight.... And it is relevant to recall that the analogy between sight and touch had its technical counterpart in Rembrandt's handling of paint: his exploitation of the reflection of natural light off high relief to intensify highlights and cast shadows unites the visible and the substantial.** (Bold original)

Similarly, by equating his hands with the mirror before which she undresses the poet shows his fascination for the sense of touch:

A knock on the door:
you entered.
Undressed quietly before the mirror
of my hands

(*Rough Passage* 79)

Now the 'hand'-mirror makes a woman, whose beauty has been dimmed by Time's 'harsh light', beautiful. Here I feel tempted to mention Ackerman's observation on the effectiveness of touch in the section titled "Touch":

> Touch fills our memory with a detailed key as to how we're shaped. A mirror would mean nothing without touch. [……
> ……]**But, above all, touch teaches us that life has depth and contour; it makes our sense of the world and ourself three-dimensional.** Without that intricate feel for life there would be no artists, whose cunning is to make sensory and emotional maps, and no surgeons, who dive through the body with their fingers.

The poet's obsession with the tactile is further embodied in the following synaesthesia:

[…….] The touch of your breasts is ripe
in my arms. They obliterate my eyes

with their tight parabolas of gold.

(*Rough Passage* 79)

Such a multi-sensory metaphor inevitably reminds us of the voluptuous lines of Keats in "Bright Star": "Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast, / To feel for ever its soft fall and swell, / Awake for ever in a sweet unrest." It involves a confusion of multiple senses – tactile, gustatory ('ripe'), and optical ('obliterate my eyes'). Besides, it is a shape-colour synaesthesia in that the lover's eyes are dazzled not by the golden glitter of her breasts but by their tight parabolas of gold. Again, parabolas, which being geometrical shapes are likely to be perceived in terms of vision, are perceived as a tactile experience. Here we get another dimension of the metaphor, that is, shape-touch synaesthesia.

A confusion of the sense of taste, of touch and kinesis also can be traced in the following metaphor:

It's you I commemorate tonight.
The sweet water
of your flesh I draw
with my arms, as from a well,
its taste as ever
as on night of Capricorn

(*Rough Passage* 79)

Touch along with kinesis allows the lover to taste the 'sweet water of your flesh'.

Under the starlit sky at an august night the speaker gazes at the beautiful hand of the beloved which seems to him a far-flung galaxy. But it is the touch of his telescopic fingers which helps him bring the distant to his reach:

Yet, by itself, your hand was a galaxy
I could reach, even touch
in the sand with my half inch telescopic
finger [……]

(*Rough Passage* 80)

This is how touch corresponds to vision, adding to the effectiveness of this metaphor.

Is the poet a synesthete? does he affect synaesthetic experience? is he on LSD? are the questions that crop up from the discussion. *Oxford Companion to Body* explains that synaesthetes inhabit "a world slightly, but magically different from that of most people" — a world of additional colours, shapes, and sensations. As Diane Ackerman observes:

> Synesthesia can be hereditary, so it's not surprising that Nabokov's mother experienced it, nor that it expressed itself slightly differently in her son. However, it's odd to think of Nabokov, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Huysmans, Baudelaire, Joyce, Dylan Thomas and other notorious synesthetes as being more primitive than most people, but that may indeed be true. **Great artists feel at home in the luminous spill of sensation, to which they add their own complex sensory Niagara**. It would certainly have amused Nabokov to imagine himself closer than others to his mammalian ancestors, which he would no doubt have depicted in a fictional hall of mirrors with suave, prankish, Nabokovian finesse. (Bold original)

It is hard to establish that Parthasarathy was a born synaesthete like Baudelaire, Dylan Thomas, and et al. Nor is he known for his any "remarkable tricks of synesthesia" (Ackerman, ibid.) like Dame Edith Sitwell who used to lie in an open coffin for a while to harness her senses before she started her writing, or Schiller who would keep rotten apples in his desk drawer and sniff the intense smell to discover the right word to use in his poetry. But Parthasarathy's liking for synaesthesia is also testified in his another exquisitely beautiful poem "Remembered Village", where the poet disgusted with the priest's erroneous Sanskrit in the temple hears 'Bells curl up their lips'. It shows the transference of both epithet and sense. Preoccupied with the prospects of transferred sense the poet also sniffs the odorous howls of the stray dogs outside:

A black pillaiyar temple squats at one end of the village –
stone drum that is beaten thin on festivals by the devout.
Bells curl their lips at the priest's rustic Sanskrit.
Outside, pariah dogs kick up an incense of howls.

May be all this is a case of acquired synaesthesia, or the poet consciously affects synaesthetic experiences. The effects of the physical love as celebrated by the speaker here also seem to be similar to those of LSD synaesthesia. Contemporary medical research on hallucinogens shows that a man on LSD (Lysergic Acid Diethylamide) may have synaesthetic experience. Dutch author and scientific researcher Crétien van Campen records:

> […….]Often I read wild-sounding descriptions by poets proclaiming the merits of their drug-induced synesthesia, and then I'd switch to science and read the pharmacology and neurology of the same experience and compare notes. The writings in both sections made it clear to me that there is definitely a special relationship between drugs and synes-thesia, but that relationship turns out to be quite different from what I expected.(104)

He also observes:

> In eighteenth-century England, opium was considered a normal medicine and was used in much the same way that people use aspirin today: opium was considered a good remedy for pain, fatigue, and depression and could be obtained at the local shop. […… ……] Several English writers and poets of the Romantic period wrote about their opium experiences, including Thomas de Quincey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, George Crabbe, and Francis Thompson. Their descriptions some-times include visions that remind me of contemporary reports by synesthetes. For instance, the poet and opium addict Francis Thompson (1859–1907) noted on one occasion that he saw the sun rise "with a clash of cymbals"; on another occasion, he described how "tunes rose in twirls of gold" when "light through the petals of a buttercup clanged like a beaten gong." He also heard "the enameled tone of shallow flute, and the furry richness of clarinet". (ibid.)

Nowhere can be found any mention of parthathasarathy's being addicted to any such hallucinogen, although Nissim Ezekiel, one of his contemporaries is said to have experimented with hallucinogenic drugs. Pritha Chakravorty in her essay "Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)" records:

> The 1960s brought major change in his [Ezekiel's] lifestyle, turning a sceptical rationalist into drug-taking promiscuous believer. In 1967while in America, he experimented with hallucinogenic drugs, probably as a means to expand his writing skills. (65)

And if Parthasarathy be an addict he was addicted to love as recorded in "Exile":

> as I walk, my tongue hunchbacked
> with words, towards Jadavpur
> to your arms. You smell of gin
> and cigarette ash. Your breasts,
> sharp with desire, hurt my fingers.
> Feelings beggar description…
>
> (*Rough Passage* 76)

To suppress the agony of exile he uses physical love as a drug or hallucinogen, which results in love as a synaesthetic experience. The excitement of love is so much that one sense overlaps another, creating a sense of confusion as it happens in case of a man on LSD.

Nandini Sahu observes:

> It ["Trial"] is a series of 15 love songs suffused with passion and sensuousness. The poet accepts love because it offers him an "unspeakable relief" at the most needed moments. Thus the period of exile becomes a period of conceptualisation. As a development to it, "Trial" is an effort at recapitulation of the poet's youth against the background of the misery and loneliness he underwent during the period of exile. It is an attempt to bring meaning to the present by reassessing the past and by giving shape to his early youth. (84-85)

However, the speaker is also aware of the inadequacies of love as a synaesthetic experience:

> […….] thus celebrate
> Something so perishable, trite.
>
> (*Rough Passage* 80)

It is invigorating and refreshing, but transitory. Regarding this Prof. P. K.J. Kurup rightly comments:

> One can go on citing examples showing conflicting passions within the poetic self where the invigorating and refreshing quality of love is juxtaposed with the transitoriness of bodily fulfilment and with the image of death and despair. The predominant voice in each case is one of modern melancholic experience of disappointment with an irritable and unprotesting glumness and a blead recognition of the self's and life's own limitations. (261)

Parthasarathy's employment of synaesthetic language, rather touch-oriented language, in *Rough Passage* ("Trial") may be justified by the following observation by Ackerman on the symbiosis of language and sense of touch:

> Language is steeped in metaphors of touch. We call our emotions feelings, and we care most deeply when something "touches" us. […… …… …….] As Frederick Sachs writes in The Sciences, "The first sense to ignite, touch is often the last to burn out: long after our eyes betray us, our hands remain faithful to the world.... in describing such final departures, we often talk of losing touch."

And, there is not only a preponderance of the sense of touch, but the tactile sensory input either invades the territories of other senses, or gets invaded by them, making the poem both rich and complex. Far from being "the extraordinary heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses"(196), that is claimed by Richards as the very hallmark of such poems as "Ode to a Nightingale", "The Definition of Love", "Nocturnal upon S. Lucies Day" etc., the poem in question is a state of conflicting impulses, where the impulse of touch rules the roost. However, this border-crossing of the senses never limits the aesthetic value of the poem, rather makes physical love more enjoyable by supplementing the inadequacy of one sense by effectiveness of another one. Perhaps no other literary device can express the excitement of physical love in a better way. Above all, employment of synaesthesia helps the poet re-define love --- love as a synaesthetic experience that relives him for the time being of the pangs of being exiled, though it is not eternal joy or everlasting love.

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