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Adding new perspectives to the aesthetics of Indian Poetry in English: An interview with Indian bilingual poet, Syam Sudhakar

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Abstract:

Syam Sudhakar is a prolific contemporary bilingual poet from India, writing poems both in his mother-tongue, Malayalam, and English, who has produced a considerable body of work in both languages. His credits include *Drenched by the Sun*, the second edition of which was published by Sydney School of Arts and Humanities in 2016, a collection of 40 English poems, the screen book of poems, “Slicing the Moon” (2014), besides a number of collections in Malayalam poetry. Most recently some of his poems have featured in the anthology, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (2019), published by Sahitya Akademi. He is known for his use of images that are at once real and magical and often have a dream-like quality, with layers of meanings. His poems are at once rich in the Indian tradition of myth and culture, infused with the modern-day images influenced by science and technology, specially television and mobile. This interview, taken throughout October- November, 2019, explores Sudhakar’s career as a poet till date. Topics that have been discussed in the interview include Indian English poetry, Sudhakar’s treatment of static and moving images, screenplay writing, digitalization of poems (*Slicing the Moon*), translations of poems from regional languages to English, magic realism and *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians*.

Keywords: Syam Sudhakar, *Drenched by the Sun*, *Slicing the Moon*, Indian English poetry, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians*.

- 1. Congratulations for the recently published anthology, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* from Sahitya Akademi that includes some of your poems. Please tell us which poems were included and why particularly those?**

Thank you, *Kaaladeepakam*, *Green Sun* and *The Tea Cup* are published in that book. I went for a reading at Agartala (Tripura, India), which was organized by Sahitya Akademi, a couple of

years back. I read eight poems there and the editor chose these three for publication. It is purely the editor's choice which may include his aesthetic sense and even the length of the poem.

2. Do you remember the first poems you read that captured your imagination as a child?

Though ours was a nuclear family, we often used to visit my mother's house. It was a house with many members, some of them teachers, and we had a good collection of books there. I remember my aunt used to sing me a song when I was a child and naturally I by-heart it. It was only later that I realized that it was not a song, but a poem called 'Poothapattu' by Edasseri Govindan Nair. Lines from various poems used to fly around in that house and I as a child tried to catch them, and each time when I tried they managed to escape from my fingertips. I was fascinated and tired at the same time that they vanish when you try to catch them. But later when I began to go to school, I started hating poems. This is because teachers force you to by-heart some of the lines and they try to explain it, which I never used to like. Once you explain a poem, the essence is lost because a poem is not something that could be diluted and distributed.

3. You want to say that every reader will have an independent understanding of the poems, depending upon his own reading? The Reader-response theory?

Yes, it varies from person to person. Poetry talks in the language of dream, madness or desire of the being. This concrete or the abstract language of the poetry is being decoded by the reader who has a totally different language, both consciously and unconsciously. So, it is not like a normal communication where one encodes and the other decodes. Here, the readers also possess a strange but licensed freedom of communication, which is called 'interpretation'. I think every art is being created in such a language which is open for interpretation and it is this sense of freedom that makes it pass through generations.

4. Who induced you into reading poems or did you develop the habit on our own?

It was when I was seventeen that poems started coming to me, and one of my uncles who is a Malayalam poet bought me books. He never told me how to read a poem instead he recited long and beautiful poems to me. Now, when I look back it seems like he was throwing a stone into a river for the water to polish it. Kerala, like many other Indian states, had a great tradition of poetry recitals. Audio cassettes of recitals by several poets were sold in considerable numbers. I used to listen to cassettes of O.N.V. Kurup and Madhusoodanan Nair. P.M Govindanunni encouraged me

to read several poets such as Ezhuthachan, Cherusseri, Poonthanam, Kunchan Nambiar, Vallathol, Kumaran Asan, Changambuzha Krishna Pillai, Vayalar, Edasseri, Vailoppili, P. Kunjiraman Nair, Satchidanandan, Ayyappa Panickar, K.G. Sankara Pillai, Attoor Ravi Varma, Balachandran Chulikkadu, Vijayalakshmi, T.P Rajeevan, Rafeeq Ahamed and P.P Ramachandran. Some of my friends such as Christine, Rapheal and Biju shared contemporary Western, Indian and Malayalam poems with me. I used to translate Wislawa Szymborska, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Attila Jozsef, Fernando Pessoa and several others to refine my own language.

5. You have been reading a lot of Malayalam poems since childhood. How, according to you has Malayalam poetry evolved over the years?

When I started writing, poets were more concerned about theme, craft and choice of imageries in their poems. They were discussing whether to write poems in traditional verse forms or, more prosaic forms. But now things have changed, a rare sense of freedom is there in new writings especially after poets started publishing in social media. Poems became more political and the language became lucid. I feel that poetry is now used as a tool of political expression. Many poetry readings were conducted earlier, not only by Sahitya Akademi but by clubs, colleges etc. but nowadays only a few open poetry readings are being conducted. Maybe poets started expressing more through social media and blogs.

6. Is there any difference between modern Indian English poetry and modern Malayalam poems? What are your thoughts?

Very much, I think poetry across the globe has changed a lot, over the last few decades. Now, it is difficult to categorize poetry in a monolithic framework as writings of each writer vary in their themes, motifs, diction, style, stands and energy. It will be difficult to bring more than fifteen poets under the same umbrella of 'contemporariness', both in English writing from India or any other regional writings. But I personally have a liking towards regional poems and their translations because I could see more life and cultural roots in them. I think the essence of India lies in its cultural diversity and Indian poetry should be a reflection of that. I think the very word 'Indian English writing' that we repeatedly use in our syllabus should be reframed as 'English poetry from India' or 'Indian poetry'.

7. What made you start writing poems in English? Was it an increased readership or you just wanted to explore the language?

It happened naturally. Initially, I started writing in Malayalam and my readings were also in Malayalam. Later, when I shifted to Chennai in 2006, I started expressing and communicating in English. It was really difficult to answer the same old question ‘in which language do you think’ because the process of thinking itself is a separate language which transgresses the boundaries of linguistic units. It was never for an increased readership. I think poetry is the most ‘personal genre’ and most of the poets do not envisage a mass readership.

8. Is it that you first write your poems in Malayalam and then translate them into English? Are all English poems translations? Do you think that somewhere, something or the other gets lost in translation? Or do you think as is generally said that while on the one hand some things gets lost in translation, on the other something new is created?

It is very difficult to give an answer to this question for any bi-lingual poet. I remember Arun Kolatkar once said that he has sharpened his pencil at both ends, with one side up for English and with the other up for Marathi. It is really difficult to control the language of thought and the language of poetry. Most of my earlier poems were written in Malayalam and later I re-wrote them in English. There are many poems that spontaneously come in English and later I translate those into Malayalam. I was not just translating but I add a lot at times and delete a lot as well. There are instances where I translate a poem and it becomes a totally different poem altogether, that is why I don’t want to use the word ‘translation’ but, ‘re-writing’.

I do translate other poets and as far as I know, translation is a wonderful exercise to enhance your creativity. Many great writers like Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo and many others were great translators as well. Painters copy great works to learn and polish their craft. Of course, we lose and gain one aspect or the other while translating, but the process of translation is really important. I believe that translation itself is a creative process. I have heard many people lamenting on ‘what is lost in translation’. How much can a poet claim that the ‘original’ poetry he or she had in mind is written on the page? In the same way, there is no point in trying to recapture all the

essence of the original. This idea came from a thought that ‘the original is always better’. I think what is performed on the page should be considered original.

9. You have won quite a few awards for your poems at this young age. How does it feel?

Not many awards but yes, a few. Genuine recognitions make everyone happy; it feels good that your friends and family members congratulate you and some recognize you on the streets. But don’t you think that we will forget about in a few days and start our routine? Awards won’t last but a work of art will.

Awards are of course an encouragement but neither can it produce a better poem nor a poet. When I read the news about somebody has bagged an award or someone returns an award or questions the authenticity of it, we should understand that it is a part of a larger discourse which is at times totally away from the quality of the work of art. Great writers are remembered for the greatness of their work, not for the award they have won.

10. Tell us about “Slicing the Moon” (2013). The entire concept and creative process.

It happened when I was in Chennai around 2008, and it was the brainchild of Jijo James who is a freelance editor now. It is basically a video rendering of my poems. The plan started long back and it took so many years to make it practical, money being a major constraint. After the death of Liz Jom Bastin, my friend who died of cancer, we all wanted to finish it off for her because she was helping me when I was reworking on my poems in English. Many of our friends such as Kannan, Jemima, Sreedevi N.S and Sreedevi. D supported us financially and the dancers Sruthi, Sampreetha, Ashritha and Devadas performed voluntarily. Uma, Treesa and myself were reciting the poems. At that time we had no idea how to bring it to the market or I would say it was done for the market. Blackdot Lab was owned by Jijo during that time. Later Christine Williams, the Director of the Sydney School of Arts and Humanities, who always wanted me to weave a world outside my cocoon, said that she will publish and distribute it.

We used to enjoy the evenings where we met at Marina beach for our long discussions, Masala tea, train travels, phone calls, food, disagreements etc. When it became an actuality we all were super excited; it was dedicated to Liz (Jijo has his penname Lis and I don’t want you to confuse him with her) and we went to her house and gave the first copy to her brother Romano.

11. Do you feel there should be more of these “digitalization” of poems? Do they reach the readers more? Is it easier to market and promote poems this way? What’s your take on it?

Mixing of genres is always a good idea. When a poem is reproduced visually using technology, its reach is totally different. There are chances that these poems may reach a person who has never read poems in his lifetime.

After the popularity of radio and tape-recorder, several poets started reciting their works. We have listened to the likes of Sylvia Plath, Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg and many others reciting their poems. Now it is the time of the visual medium when several writers across the globe have combined their words with the technology of visual. Creativity is finding its new sky, here the creative world of the writer is merging with the creative world of the director/editor. It is an entirely new experience. The imagination of the writer is imbibed and reproduced by another creative person. It has new horizons and we need to have a different methodology other than the traditional parameters of literary criticism to analyze it.

12. Name some of your poems both in English and Malayalam that are your personal favourites till date.

Though I have scribbled several lines before I think *Eerpam* is the first poem that came to me as a whole spontaneously. At that time I didn’t even know that it was a poem. The Malayalam version of ‘Due’, ‘Once an ant’, ‘Enchantress atop the Potted Palm’, ‘Digging’, ‘Muziris’ and the English version of ‘Green Sun’, ‘All the Lucky Ones’, ‘Lady Spider’s Suicide Note’, ‘The Teacup’, and ‘Keeper of the Sea’ are a few names that comes to my mind right now.

13. Who are your favorite poets?

It is really difficult to answer this question. Many names come to my mind. A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Jayanta Mahapatra, Sitakant Mahapatra, Dom Moraes, Keki N. Daruwalla, Agha Sahid Ali, Kamala Das, Sudeep Sen, Jeet Thayil, Vivek Narayanan are a few Indian names. I used to enjoy reading ‘The Crescent Moon’ by Rabindranath Tagore. Octavio Paz, Constantine Cavafy, Pablo Neruda, Carlos Pezoa, Yehuda Amichai, George Seferes, Odysseus Elytis, Wislawa Szymborska, Tomas Tranströmer, Vasko Popa, Paul Muldoon, Patrick Cavanagh, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Attila Joseph, Jeff Page, Vicki Viidikas are a few

writers across the globe. K. Satchidanandan, Thachom Poyil Rajeevan, P.P Ramachandran, V. Jayadevan, Vijayalekshmi, Rafeeq Ahamed, S. Kalesh, K.P Chitra, M.P Pratheesh and several others who write in Malayalam and a few English Poets from Kerala such as Aditya Shankar, Ravi Shankar and S. Chandramohan have caught my attention. I have translated poems of Salma and Yuma Vasuki from Tamil to Malayalam.

14. You have interviewed or shared stage with quite a few poets like Jeet Thayil, Taslima Nasreen, Yuvan and a few others. Whose poems do you like most? Which has been your most satisfying interaction?

I launched ‘Split: A Life’ by Taslima Nasreen when the publisher organized a book launch in Thrissur. I enjoyed talking with her personally and felt that she is a wonderful writer who has bold opinions of her own. But I didn’t like the ambience of nearly fifty policemen around you on the stage ‘to protect you’. It must be really difficult for her to go out and have a cup of coffee on her own. I loved interacting with Jeet Thayil, I already knew him, and therefore, the interaction was much easier. He was friendly and after our official interaction, we had a chat at the nearby restaurant. N.S. Madhavan and Sabitha Satchidanandan joined us later. I found that Jeet talked very less, was very sensitive and he had a strange flair of language which I think he picked up from the streets of the fifties and sixties United States. I also enjoyed talking to Yuvan, a Tamil writer who was a long-time friend of mine. He sobbed seeing me after so many years, he is very sensitive, logical in his thoughts and a wonderful poet. I got an opportunity to talk to a few more writers from abroad at a literary festival. But the problem is that literary festivals always invite people who can find funding of their own or who will be funded by the state or state machineries. Writers who talk against the state won’t be funded or encouraged mostly.

15. You have just finished a script- writing project for a Malayalam film. Tell us about it, anything you would like to share.

It’s for a popular movie which is not named yet. Arun Bose, who is a friend, is directing the movie. Since I haven’t completed it yet, I can’t say much about it. To write a script you really need to have a discipline. This is an opportunity for me to discipline myself.

16. Do you teach creative writing? Do you think poetry can be “taught” to write, or do you think that it is instinctive?

I offer a course on creative writing for the Undergraduate classes. Writing poetry, I believe is an instinct. Reading too is an instinct. But at the same time, you can practice it over and over again to develop the skills. If a person has the talent, this practice and slight guidance might help them. I don't think one can make a lot of writers through creative writing classes, but at least trigger their aptitude towards art and literature.

17. In your poems the real and the magical coalesce effortlessly leading one to infer that there is an abundance of the technique of magic realism in your poems. There is very little magic realism used in Indian poems written in English. What do you have to say on that? And also, many of your poems have a dream- like quality. Please comment on that too.

I really don't know whether the poems are magical realist. It was not deliberate. I grew up in a space where people drink with gods, curse them, you may see a demoness anytime when you open the door of your house. The dancing fire and smoke from the hearth, oracle talking to the dead, smell of snakes, blind alleys, astrologers, the intense fragrance of blooming trees, moon hiding in the lonely creases of palm leaves, never-ending music of the rain and drunkards who quarrel with a dead train. Will you believe me if I say, I do nothing to bring magical realism but I am being truthful to my senses.

18. There is an abundance of moving images in your poems. Can you please comment on your choice of imagery?

I was born in the beginning of the eighties; it was a time when television started getting popular in Kerala. I remember going to a neighbour's house in the night to see cricket, football and even the popular TV serial, *Ramayana* as there was no television in my house. Our neighbour used to keep the television at a height, where more than twenty people of the neighbouring houses could watch it. My 'views' are very well influenced by the moving images of television. I don't belong to a generation which takes things in 'photographic memory', but a strong moving vision memory. I always wanted to know if the structure of our dreams is affected by deep technological innovations. I really wanted to ask people of the nineteenth century about the structure of their

dream and imagination, and compare it with mine. I think television and cinema has a great impact on the people who are born in the eighties and nineties, just like the internet and its virtual culture has a great impact on those who are born in the twenty-first century. Poets do not choose an image but it will naturally come to them. In my case, television and cinema must have influenced me, just like radio has influenced many poets in fifties and early sixties.

19. Quite a number of your poems are on animals. Also, Nature has a powerful presence in your poems in general. Are you more comfortable in dealing with Nature as a subject than with anything else?

I was always fond of animals. The biological museums fascinate me than the historic museums. I always feel that there are connections between animals, plants and human beings. Ted Hughes understood this idea long time back. His poems a little dark in a deeper sense, it has a magical quality. Animals came to me not just from Ted Hughes, I was a great fan of Aesop and Grim tales. Even the Jataka and Panchathandra stories show how deep the connection is. But after sometime when we grow up we are away from all these things. One should connect oneself with the ecosystem.

As for choosing Nature as a subject, I don't generally choose a subject for poetry but poetry chooses me as a subject. Writing and seeing Nature never bored me. Since we are a micro-entity of the larger of the cosmic reality, how can you escape from it, not talk about it? That doesn't mean that human-made things don't fascinate you. Every art is human-made and at the same time divine. A work of art is human-made but at the same time cannot be separated from nature or cosmos. Every good poem is a drop from a star which always twinkles in your heart. It makes you feel as if you are in love, it makes your eyes wet, throat choke.

20. Apparently your poems do not always appear to be directly political. What do you say? Do you consider your poems to be political?

I haven't written anything which is not political. I think individuals cannot escape from the political reality around them. If you observe closely, to get engaged with the work of art in any possible way itself is a political act, in the context of globalization and liberal economy. I may not sound overtly political but if you look deeply you can see it. There are two ways to see a pond. Some people may be stuck with the beauty and light on the surface of the pond, where you can see

either a blooming lotus or a tired water-lily. While some others are fascinated by the life inside the water which is not so easy to see through, still if you try you can. The second category always fascinates me than the first. Politics lies in the depth too.

21. Why is Death so important in your poems?

I always felt that death is somewhere around you. Whenever we cross the road, as in one of the poems of Wislawa Szymborska, we never know when it opens its door for us, when we trod upon it, while crossing the road. It is like you knock unknowingly and death opens itself for you. The game between desire and death always fascinates me. Do you remember, The Game of playing Chess with death in Bergman's *Seventh Seal* where death proclaims that he is a cheater? M.T. Vasudevan Nair, an acclaimed Malayalam writer once equated death with a joker, who has no sense of stage. A death has changed my entire perspective of life. I could see people suffering because someone has died in the family. When young people die, it's like the taproot has been taken away from a plant. Tears, the shame of death, people pretending as if they forgot the dead person, fear of keeping the dead man's photograph, sobbing in the late nights when it is all dark around you, late-night hallucinations, people punish themselves by starving because of the sense of guilt-all are common there. Liz in her last days of cancer once told me that she is not afraid of death but the earth is so beautiful and it's difficult for a person to leave all these things and part. From her death, I realized that life is so precious and committing suicide is like demeaning the dreams of those who really wanted to live on this earth but who couldn't.

22. The editor of *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians*, where your poems feature, says that presently Indian poetry in English is superior than what is being produced in the genre of general fiction. What is your opinion on that?

I think he must have mentioned the popular fiction writers such as Jayashree Mishra, Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Shobha de and others. I don't think that the above mentioned comment on popular fiction in India is to demean anyone in particular or a particular genre but points out the stock structures and patterns in new Indian popular fiction and the business behind it. I don't think Sudeep Sen will have the same opinion about the writings of Amitav Ghosh, Rushdie or Arundhati Roy. I think it is a dialogue between the concept of high art and popular art which started in the second half of twentieth century and which still continues.

Poetry is not a popular genre and very few can win either business or great fame from it. It is basically an expression of self where soul is important than craft. It is difficult to create a poem with mere formulas. I don't know whether poetry is superior to fiction and placing one over the other makes me remind of the same old debate between Shaivaites and Vaishnavites about the superiority of their Gods.

23. Would you like to venture into fiction-writing?

I tried it once. I have written four chapters of a novel which I wrote in one night. I do have the story, structure and plan. I will be happy if I could revisit it soon.

24. In terms of future projects, what's next for you?

Want to finish the novel I have already started. And I am also working on a screenplay for a friend, who is also a director. I have plans to translate some of the Bhakti poets into Malayalam. Also I am planning for a next book of poems.

25. Do you have any particular name in mind?

I plan to start with Andal (Godadevi) first, who happens to be the only female Alvar among the twelve Alvar saints of South India. I wish to translate from Tamil to Malayalam.

26. All the best for your future endeavours.

Thank you.