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Of Grief and Survival: Spirituality and Affect in the Poetry of K Satchidanandan and Louise Gluck

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to attempt a cross-cultural, comparative study of selected translations of the Malayalam Poet K. Satchidanandan and selected poems of the American Poet Louise Gluck. The emphasis is on the underlying spiritual concerns and related affects in their poetry. On the one hand, where Satchidanandan's ideology differentiates the spiritual from the religious and calls the "sacred as equal to the secular," Gluck's poems showcase a sort of ambivalence wherein the poet wishes to be free herself from the compelling yet restricting forces of the "immutable", (which is spiritual), and wishes a union with the earthly. Although their approaches are different, their concerns on spirituality converge at the point where the poets wish to anchor their notions of harmony and peaceful co-existence. Both their poetry, I feel, reinstate the need to connect to the instinctual and steadfast ideas of love and earthly life. Gluck's notion of how "suffering can yield meaning" could be paralleled with Satchidanandan's urge to "look at the ill-lit corners of hope" in attempting an understanding of the idea of humanity espoused by their poetry. I try to explore how the two poets use different poetic strategies to arrive at their notions of spirituality, and at the same time stay united by the commonality of the ultimate and universal need to preserve humanity at both the individual and collective levels.

Keywords: Affect, Spirituality, Grief, Hope, Ambivalence.

Introduction

Poetry is often considered a profound form of literary expression owing primarily to its linguistic and structural intricacies. While reading two poets from very different cultural backgrounds, this complexity is accentuated as their poetry is seen to deploy strategies (both thematic and formal) specific to their domains of writing. Nevertheless, I think such poetry always can connect in terms of the larger vision they espouse. In this reading, I try to explore this aspect of cross-cultural analysis and forge a relation along the spiritual concerns explored in the works of the chosen poets.

As for the chosen poems of Satchidanandan, they are initially written in Malayalam and translated into English by the poet himself. The poet's critical writings on poetry in general, and his works, have provided valuable insights for developing this paper. The background to the study of Gluck's poetry is primarily derived from the critical works that specifically address the concept of the divine in her poetry.

Drawing on these references, I seek to conceive a common spiritual framework for their poems that necessitates an affinity to, and understanding the essence of human connection. I propose that by studying the different valences of human lives and relationships expressed through their poetry, we can arrive at a formula for spiritual attainment, which is rooted in the very idea of humanity. By establishing the importance of such a connection, the paper elaborates on the significance of human bonds and their potential to reinvigorate lives.

Jane Hirshfield suggests in her article on spiritual poetry that "Spiritual poems emerge in response to the central questions of human life- mortality and transience, isolation and alienation- the question of suffering in all its dimensions'." Furthering this idea, the quality of suffering which entails a spiritual relevance is explored in their poems. I look at how the poets

deal with the subject of suffering- the characters they introduce and the events and circumstances experienced by the characters. Are the undertones of resistance in these responses? What are the kinds of characters introduced by the poets? What are the means of survival employed by these characters?

Although the poets deal with the theme of suffering, I feel their approaches are quite distinct regarding treatment. Myths and Religious images are standard features of their poetry. While Satchidanandan mainly alludes to the epics and myths of Indian origin, Gluck's mythical imagery is derived mainly from the Greek Epics. Apart from the classical symbols, both the poets engage with the nuances of the 'every day, collecting and recollecting chapters from personal lives adorned with deep symbols and imagery.

For the study, I intend to take up one important aspect of Gluck's poetry that most critics take to be the basis of any discussion on her poetry- the poet's ambivalent stance on the subjects she explores. Gluck's poems are usually characterized by ambivalence, be it in the emotional distance she maintains from the work or the onlooker stance she takes even while considering the lyric speaker. When it comes to ideas of spirituality, Gluck maintains the same ambivalence. In the collection *The Wild Iris* (1992), Gluck can be seen as a communicator who uses the symbols and tropes from nature in the negotiations with the divine. Daniel Morris, in his work, *Louise Gluck: A Thematic Introduction*, analyzes a poem where Gluck depicts a conversation between a flower and a gardener:

The fact that the flower is granted consciousness possesses a voice, and displays an emotional range that includes the wish for transcendence- as well as the gardener's paradoxical urge both to find human love and transcend her body- suggests how freely Gluck mixes immanent and transcendental conceptions of divinity. (195)

In the later collections, like *The Vita Nova* (1999) and *Seven Ages* (2001), the focus is shifted to the earthly ways of life and the physicality of experience. I take up this ambivalence of the poet, in trying to bring home the idea of connection and survival that potentially entails a form of spiritual fulfillment at the end. The emphasis would be on the change in the poetic evolution of Gluck that, as suggested above, harbours a return to the earthly or the physical from the yearnings for the divine.

Satchidanandan's poems, on the other hand, carry the themes of nationalism and the critiques of fascist political and religious ideologies, along with his treatment of the mundane. These ideas are carefully interspersed to define the state of human existence, both in its physical and ideological terms. "My commitment is largely ethical, to certain values, like justice, equality, freedom, love, and respect, for all forms of life" (Satchidanandan 152), comments the poet in one of his articulations on poetry and life. Taking this standpoint, Satchidanandan's poems could be observed as valiantly upholding the ethics of togetherness and harmony. In the poem "Birds Come After Me," he assumes the figure of an all-encompassing presence that calls for the union of all creatures around- "Birds come after me/as if I were a walking tree...I grow many hands/from the legs for the parrots/from the hip for crows/from the belly and the back/the cranes, eagles/ kingfishers and owls/ and tiny twigs for/ sparrows and treepies"(407).

Hence, the paper attempts to yield a combined reading of their poems to extract the idea of a spiritual union that is synonymous with a life of healthy inter-relationships. To support my argument, I intend to study the poems alongside the theory of "Affect," which in aesthetic terms, is associated with the tones, moods, emotions, and the overall atmosphere of any poem. I use the theory to aid the analysis of the poems' stylistics, as well as to explore the dominant "affects"(like happiness, fear, sorrow, and so on) in the poems. Through this approach, I try to buttress the idea that a proper understanding of humanity and the connections that could be formed between people, can be achieved only through an understanding of how affects work,

in and among us. I also intend to explore the implications of ‘suffering’, the myriad dimensions it takes in the chosen poetry, alongside Kubler-Ross’s theory on the five stages of Grief.

Vestiging the thread

The theme of suffering is a defining element of both their poetry. However, the lament, if any, is not for the catastrophes caused by the suffering; rather, it is for the human inability to grasp the essence of the suffering and what it signifies. Both the poets move in their own pathways towards making this understanding.

While suffering is presumed to be an end, veiling of life, some of Gluck’s poems amplify the implications of suffering as new beginnings. For instance, the poem “Fantasy,” begins like this- “I’ll tell you something: everyday people are dying/and that’s just a beginning/every day, in funeral homes, new widows are born, new orphans” (Gluck 211). Death is considered a beginning here- the event of death is reported in a casual and matter-of-fact manner. The beginning here is not an afterlife for the people dead, but a beginning of a new life for the people who are still alive, who have to live with the burden of the loss, yet cope with it. However, it is indeed a new beginning for those who are left behind. Grief is inevitable; in fact, the poet is actually referring to the new life, not in a very hopeful manner, what is emphasized is the loss itself. Still, we could say that by talking about the new life, there is also a hint of how over time, people will get adapted to the change- so there's an underlying element of hope, which of course, can be realised only at a later stage for the victims. The focus is shifted to these people and not the dead, denoting that suffering should be conceived not as a permanent ending, rather as a surpassable condition.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her study on the stages of grief, suggests five stages of undergoing grief that begins with denial and culminates in acceptance. Although she does not insist that the stages are linear, the suggestion is that in attempting to cope with grieving, people

tend to go through these stages. She talks about “anticipatory grief,” which she defines as “the beginning of the end in our minds”(Kubler-Ross 24). This anticipation could be understood as the preparatory modes the human mind goes through to caution itself about impending grief. Reading Gluck’s poems in the light of this idea, it can be observed that her poetry moves a step further to contemplate the anticipations that occur post the loss of a beloved one. Kubler-Ross suggests that the stages of grief occur for both the dying and their loved ones both before and after the loss. Gluck’s poetry, while transitioning through the states of grief in Kubler-Ross’s model and the anticipations before that, draws in on the necessity of survival that has its spiritual anchoring on notions of hope.

Correspondingly, in the poem “A Novel,” the poet again evokes the images of the death of a family member but focuses on the ones who are left behind. “There was only one hero/now the hero is dead/like echoes, the women last longer/they’re all too tough for their own good”(Gluck 212). Here too, her focus is on the ones staying back and not much on the dead and what they will experience as afterlife. So, it could be observed that the remaining people and their need to be glued to each other, is another aspect of the connection proposed by Gluck, which we could read along the spiritual lines mentioned in the paper. As the poet says, "They're all too tough for their own good"- is something, which necessitates the need for survival. Also, this poem could be read as one that contests the conventional notion of an independent woman being vulnerable and helpless without the presence of a man. Gluck, therefore, also suggests the need to find a connection to ourselves as well, be it man or woman, which is necessary if a connection as perceived above is to be visualized.

In one of Satchidanandan’s poems, “How to Go To The Tao Temple” the poet discusses an “unmade idol” (Satchidanandan 21) that awaits the human who goes in search of the Tao Temple, to relinquish his sufferings. After instructing the steps to be followed in the journey, which he asks to be carried out in silence, the poet’s reference to an unmade idol suggests that

silent introspection is the essence of any realm that could be claimed spiritual. “Speak silently, if speak you must:/like the rocks speaking to the trees and leaves to flowers/ silence is the sweetest of voices and nothingness has the fairest of colours”(21).

In another poem titled “Misplaced Objects,” there is a reminder of the forgetfulness of humans that could be derived as the reason for suffering. The poet talks about some misplaced objects of his life, metaphorically referring to the inhumane and insensitive attitude towards the larger system of life. Another dimension of suffering, that is as the aftermath of a taken-for-granted negligence, is what the poet tries to emphasize here. From the lines “forgetfulness alone never forgot me”, the poet goes on and concludes later with the line “In the order he recalls, He claims back/ the woods, the rivers, and us,” thereby warning the readers of barrenness that would befall, (He, a testimonial to God) lest the misplacement continues.

Of Grief and Hope

In the poems of Satchidanandan, the affective engagement is often direct and the diction is interspersed with questions thrown at the reader. In “Old Women,” the speaker discusses how relationships change as people age. In a strong voice, the poet critiques the youth who ruthlessly disregards their parents after they age. There is both anger and strong contempt in the tone when the poet says, “ their drooping breasts/ yet have milk enough to feed/three generations/ who wouldn’t care for it” (26). Also, in the concluding lines, the poet says that these older women have become maps, mere outlines. Nevertheless, he reminds the younger generation “to keep them handy: who knows, they might help you/ find your way home”(27). Here, the idea of home could be taken as that journey to finding oneself. If so, the older women, or the traces of their lives, become the pathway or the guiding light towards this home. This idea means that, ultimately, it is the connection between humans that has the potential to seek the

power of the universe. Like the flux of affect, it is the web of connections that we forge between us, which has the potential to connect us to the larger cosmos of the universe.

On the other hand, it is the ambivalence of Gluck that impacts the affective appeal of her poetry, especially in the discussion of personal relationships. In the poem "A Fantasy," Gluck's speaker is in mourning her husband's death. She wishes for things to change and wants to be back in the time before his death. But, the ambivalence arises when the speaker specifies how far she wishes to go back:

She wants to be back in the cemetery,

back in the sickroom, the hospital.

She knows It isn't possible.

But it is her only hope, The wish to move backward.

And just a little,

Not as far as the marriage, the first kiss. (211).

Here, there is a concern over the kind of relationship she had with her dead husband. The affect here is of grief that results from loss, but at the same time, she doesn't want to begin everything all over again. She admits that she wants to go backward, and considers this return as hopeful. However, she doesn't want to go back as far as the marriage- so here, maybe we could find a parallel affect working, that of a latent relief at the death of her husband, which might be suggestive of the emotional distance in their relationship. The sorrow that is instinctual occurs, but at the same time competes with a notion of ambivalent relief/happiness. However, one desire that remains constant is that of the idea of companionship- although strained, the reason she wishes to go back to her past might be because of the lack of connection

she feels at the moment. So ultimately, there is a desire playing in both directions- wishing for a return and a change.

In the poem “The Sensual World”, Gluck talks about how she wants to get dissolved in the world of the senses, the richness of experience. “ I loved nothing more: deep privacy of the sensual life/...deep immersion, and with it/ mysterious safety”(436). Here, we can observe a preoccupation with the need for security, which the speaker finds only in a deep connection with the sensory realm; experiencing all that is available to the senses in their fullest intensity. However, in the poem, the speaker after admitting this, warns those who are coming behind to not be lured by what earth has to offer. Maybe this warning is also a suggestion to remain calm; That is, not to wish for anything more than the earth and the life in it can offer. However, at the same time savour all that comes to pass in its essence, as if the drinking of the juice made by the speaker’s grandmother, in the beginning. Here, we can connect it to affect- affects have to be acknowledged, felt, and appreciated from their sensual realm, an appreciation of the spirit of existence.

Conclusion

As we can observe, the themes of Gluck are nearly all consumed by the affect of 'Grief'. The presence of Grief in her poems carries the idea that there is no escape from the cyclicity of life that alternates between the times of happiness, and the times of sorrow. However, it is through acknowledging this inevitability that, I feel, Gluck’s poems steer forward in their ascension toward the notion of survival. Here, hope can only be valued and conceived if one travels the path of grief. The momentum of hope in our lives can be realized only if we expose ourselves fully and comprehensively in the face of distress.

On the other hand, Satchidanandan’s poems, I feel, are usually reflections of hope in themselves, even if sometimes it does not show the circumstances of the mishap. While reading

the poets in parallel, we can weave together two fundamentally unavoidable aspects of life-
grief, and hope- and their poems form a kind of trajectory that takes up from Gluck's
testimonies of Grief, and then emerges out through the resonances of Hope that Satchidanandan
so deftly articulates, thus, entailing a journey of survival, which I call in other words, spiritual
satiation. For harmonious co-existence to be achieved, it is necessary to envision a supreme
form of spiritual connectedness that revels in the glory of human relationships. And as a
medium of creative speech and expression, poetry, in all its subtleties, strives to achieve this
union, transcending the physical and cultural barriers, as in the case of Gluck's and
Satchidanandan's works.

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