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Love's Verse: Craving Krishna in Modern Times

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'Can the timelessness of extreme devotional love written across the past two millennia be measured, contained in the modern, postcolonial version of the English language? Is English a viable crucible for the power of Bhakti? Can English be a language of transcendence of a modern genre?'

Language of Modern Transcendence?

Does Krishna walk the streets of the modern world? The search for Krishna in our times took me to some theological texts, to the sacred geography of Vrindavan, and most crucially, to the tattered pages of poetry. Can the timelessness of extreme devotional love written across the past two millennia be measured, contained in the modern, postcolonial version of the English language?

I do not read Braj, Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil, Odiya, Marathi and the other Indian languages in which Bhakti poetry has been written in this long frame of the past. The vast oeuvres of Bhakti poetry reveal themselves to me in English. And so, I begin to ask: is English a viable crucible for the power of Bhakti? And further, can English be a language of transcendence of a modern genre?

I wish to take the reader through an Anglophone world of words and emotions but one that is trying desperately to hold on to the most heady, ancient, timeless kind of love, Bhakti, and breathe new (modern?) life into it. Let me begin with Arun Kolatkar's poem 'Chaitanya', written originally in English, and published in the collection *Jejuri*. It evokes divinity with the simple imagery of eating stone. Stone acts as a metaphor for idols and emerges as a powerful carrier of divine energy - spat out as gods themselves. Chaitanya - obviously alluding to the Bengal Vaishnava mystic who is understood to have embodied Radha and Krishna by followers of the school - is meagrely indexed in the poem, only as an eater of stone. His praise is not sung. His saintly, mystical attributes are not described. This meagreness, this economy is where a new register of comfort with the use of the divine ingredient in language is invented.

It is a novel use of English. It breaks with the traditions of Bhakti poetry that convey praise and devotion to a god. Remember, reader, that this is a Bombay-based poet writing in the 1970s. The world around the poet is screaming political and economic turmoil of various kinds. I won't argue that poetry has necessarily to have a nexus with social realities of the day, but the poet here is contemplating a timeless love through the stone-eating Chaitanya sitting in the crowded, postcolonial city of Bombay. The poem, amidst all the turmoil of India during the Emergency and Bombay immersed in postcolonial modernity, is a testament to the pushing of boundaries within the English language to produce, in the poem, a world that is not this world. It imports the ingredients of Bhakti poetry from times past, but vigorously invents a new poetic form.

The second poem, originally written in English, that I will discuss, is by Sri Aurobindo sometime between 1927 and 1947 in Pondicherry (Aurobindo 2005: 608).

*At last I find a meaning of soul's birth
Into this universe terrible and sweet,
I who have felt the hungry heart of earth
Aspiring beyond heaven to Krishna's feet.
I have seen the beauty of immortal eyes,
And heard the passion of the Lover's flute,
And known a deathless ecstasy's surprise
And sorrow in my heart for ever mute.
Nearer and nearer now the music draws,
Life shudders with a strange felicity;
All Nature is a wide enamoured pause
Hoping her lord to touch, to clasp, to be.
For this one moment lived the ages past;
The world now throbs fulfilled in me at last.*

Sri Aurobindo weaves a novel relationship with the English language in his poetic magnum opus *Savitri*. It is a meditation, among other things, on the eternal relationship between matter and spirit. This short poem, titled 'Krishna', extends that novelty within the English language to the form of a brief exposition of fervour and delight in the knowing of the Godhead's presence. It does not rhyme, and probably, cannot be sung or uttered in the way that popular Bhakti poetry can. But it contains an English-language of a timeless, spiritual joy. The weight of modernity that the postcolonial use of English seems to be burdened with seems to fade away.

In this time period, W.B. Yeats was writing the *Dialogue Between the Self and the Soul* (1933), where he was utterly entrenched in the contemplation of earthly suffering and the possibility of redemption. But Sri Aurobindo's poetic register is one that transcends the earth and takes his reader on a delightful journey into another world where Krishna can be touched, clasped, held, felt. The heaviness of human suffering and constraints of the earthly being are transcended with a simple ease. English emerges, in such a poem, as a language of modern transcendence. And I, a devotee and a reader, access a joyride into worlds beyond my world-weary existence through such use of the English language.

Translation: Agony and Ecstasy

The translated poems that I will allude to now import from Indian languages, a flavour of Bhakti that is native to the linguistic universe of a particular region and a time, but radically reinvent Bhakti in its English rendition. Can one scream out in English the name of the Godhead expressing joy and agony? Most of these poems were uttered first and written, recorded later. Their power lies in rendering an utterance that brings a devotee closer to the divine. Can English, I ask, be this language? If it cannot, then how am I accessing the spiritual excitement of Bhakti in English? This, really, is the aesthetic and personal puzzle that prods this essay.

The Kannada poet Basavanna writes in a poem titled 'Within', translated into English by Laxmi Chandrasekhar and Vijaya Guttal, reworked by Gabriel Rosenstock:

*Say now, what good is it
if a parrot can read aloud
but cannot hear the cat approaching
or if an eye can see the world
not knowing that the eye is squinting?
They say they know the world and all its sin
And fail, O Lord, to look within!*

(Basavanna 2020: 217)

This poem evidently acts as a kind of reproach to the pundits of the world who spout knowledge like parrots but fail to look deeply within. A parrot and a cat appear as mundane metaphors of daily, worldly predation, actions and considerations of violent survival. The last two lines take the reader into the contemplation of worlds nested within the limits of the earthly realm, where can know the divine by looking deeply within. It does not offer much else in terms of spiritual instruction, limiting itself to a simple act of ripping apart the assumptions of a worldly existence and expanding the canvas of being infinitely.

In the contemplation of the infinitesimal within the limits of modern, postcolonial English, let me bring in the components of longing and nostalgia. English translations of a vast range of poems – alluding to Bhakti or even otherwise – often portray an element of a lost world. Let me quote the Hindi poem “Magadh” by Srikant Verma, translated by Mrinal Pande:

*Which way lies the city of Magadh?
Listen, O rider of the horse.
From Magadh I come
And to Magadh
I must return.*

*Which way shall I turn?
To the North or South?
Or to the East or West?
Lo, there lies Magadh!*

And now it is gone!

*It was only yesterday
That I had left Magadh behind
And now it is gone!*

*It was only yesterday
That I had left Magadh behind,
It was only yesterday
That the people of Magadh has said.
Do not leave Magadh
I had given them my word.
That before the Sun rises
I shall be back*

And now there is no Magadh.

*Aren't you looking for Magadh as well?
Brothers.
This is not the Magadh.
That you have read about in books
This is the Magadh which you
Like me
Have lost forever.*

(Verma 2020: 98)

Here is a poem exposing a specific wound – that of collective amnesia. I find in the last stanza a painful yearning for a lost place within history. Magadh stands as an allegory for a lost place in time that the colonial watershed does not allow us to access in any material way. There is no memorialisation of Magadh except in the poet's agonising words – *This is the Magadh which you/like me/have lost forever*. No vivid descriptions of Magadh, no mentions of kings and wars and ancient scriptures, just a name that invokes an agony for a land that is ours and, yet, will never be ours. Forgivenness is writ large all across the pages of modern Indian history.

This poem is not of divine love technically, but I add it here to note an English language register of yearning for other worlds. I am especially drawn to the line “and now there is no Magadh” which is a poignant announcement of the unmoored, postcolonial condition – there is no Magadh. We are still standing here on this land without any significant relationship to its deep past. The contemplation of lost time emerges as an underscored in the search for the divine, I believe.

The acts of translation, in each poem, radically stretch the usual range of moods and affects available in English language poetic canons. These are not poems of Beatnik anger and grief, or of Eliot's Prufrock and his listlessness and urban ennui. Consistently, in a very modern (meaning, not archaic) use of the language, these translations evoke the motifs most alien to modern life – divine presence, love for the divine, an access to worlds beyond the immediate, and ultimately, the infinitesimal. The English language changes in each such act of translation, it is domesticated by introduction of alien emotions, if not alien words.

Modernity and its discontents

Sri Aurobindo, in his seminal text, *The Future Poetry* (published first in *Arya* between 1917 and 1920) talks of the future of Indian poetry that would combine English literature and the Indian mind. He writes (Aurobindo 1997: 17):

But the privilege of the poet is to go beyond and discover that more intense illumination of speech, that inspired word and supreme inevitable utterance, in which there meets the unity of a divine rhythmic movement with a depth of sense and a power of infinite suggestion welling up directly from the fountain-heads of the spirit within us. He may not always or often find it, but to seek for it is the law or at least the highest trend of his utterance, and when he can not only find it, but cast into it some deeply revealed truth of the spirit itself, he utters the mantra.

The poem as a text of mantra – an exhilarating idea that then must get tested on the canvas of the English language. I quote these lines by Sri Aurobindo to delve into contemplate the contours of this exercise of expression and access in English a very Indic emotion and affect. I think and dream in English, write poetry in English, and talk to my parents in Bangla. In this bifurcation, arises the question of faith and my own search for Krishna’s presence in the mundane, modern world.

One cannot deny that the English canon consisting of Yeats and Blake and Milton does concern itself with the question of transcendence (of Christian origins) which has regularly appeared in poetry as well. The language travels to the Indian elite through the complexes of cutcherries and court complexes and the rise of cultural nationalism. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote the first Indian English novel – *Rajmohan’s Wife*. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the Bengali poet of the mid-19th century, the writer of the Bengali ballad *Meghabadbadh Kabya*, wrote poems in English. These are commendable works of literature but they do not do the work that Kabir or Surdas or Andal or Nammalvar or Jayadeva do. The watershed of colonial modernity is loudly apparent in these works. The simple, intimate world of a conversation between a man and his maker, unencumbered by surrounding circumstances, does not arrive as a motif in Indian English poems at this time. The English works written by Indian authors are guarded in themes that could provisionally be called modern.

This bifurcation, as Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1993) has reminded us, is a typically colonial/postcolonial psychological phenomenon wherein the cultural, spiritual, emotional spheres are cordoned off by the colonial subject to preserve the sovereignty of an inner domain, while English colonises the public self – political, economic, even artistic ones in some ways.

It is with Rabindranath Tagore’s poems (many of which are translated into English by the poet himself) and Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* that we find a register of transcendence within which the immediate conditions of the modern world are disregarded. In a chat with the Godhead and in an attempt to contemplate eternity, the historical specificity of the current location of the devotee should not matter, for the devotee is only inhabiting time as one set of earthly clothes in his cycle of many lives – he could well have been the tyrant in another time. It falls upon the devotee to contemplate history as *leela* or purposeless play.

This contemplation of the infinitesimal and the timeless demands its own its stylistic strategy and craftsmanship. A novel, poetic register in English emerged in the early part of the 20th century in India in original work in English and in translation, to give expression to the search for the divine in the surrounding context of the national movement and the two world wars. This poetry is mystical but not escapist, and ushers in a new Indian linguistic, expressive register – one that is obviously home-grown and still tries to re-invent and/or domesticate the English language. It further tries to disengage the burden of modernity from the use of the English language.

It is in this genealogy, that I locate myself, born and raised in Calcutta in the latter part of the 20th century, very self-conscious about my comfort with the utter modernity that comes with speaking the English language since childhood. I remember a Bengali teacher who introduced me to the words of Joy Goswami in grade eight, for an elocution competition. It was the poem *Malatibala Balika Bidyalaya*, and its first lines went thus:

????????, ????????, ????? ??? ????
 ????????, ??? ? ? ???? ? ? ????
 ????????, ????????? ???? ???????
 ?????????, ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?

My translation:

*Benimadhab, Benimadhab, I will come to your place,
 Benimadhab, do you think of me to this day?
 Benimadhab, you played Krishna’s flute
 Under the Tamal tree, Benimadhab,
 I was in Malati school in those days.*

In weaving a mundane, small-town love story, this poem transcended containers of space and time by the simple introduction of Krishna’s flute. The poem drew me for the first time to the Bengali language, and, yet, it took me several decades to understand what the poet was actually doing. The poet drew out the drudgery of an urban, love story, in one sweep, to the frame of the infinitesimal. Perhaps, there are some limits to the extent to which the musicality of his original poem – its meter and rhyme – can reflect in the

English language. I found Krishna, unwittingly, here, for the first time. Yet, I continue to look for him in the pages of English poems, listening for the music of the flute amidst countless, faceless, tired men and women walking the streets of this bittersweet nation.

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