

Configuring Literary Memory and Cultural Memory: A Reading of K.Ayyappa Paniker's poem 'I Met Walt Whitman Yesterday: (An Interview)'

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Abstract: The prevailing engagement of memory culture with literature is inherently permeated and manifested. Literature in all its genres is characterized by mnemonic functions. In popular imagination, literature is a treasure-trove for transmission, dissemination, creation, and articulation of historical past. The present paper seeks to address a crucial question that how a literary text performs its function to retrieve cultural memory on one hand, and on the other, dispenses with a version of literary memory too. K. Ayyappa Paniker, a noted Malayalam poet and Sahitya Akademi award winner, is acclaimed as one of the founding fathers of modernist poetry in Indian literature. His poetic oeuvre is experimental in form and content, among which 'I Met Walt Whitman Yesterday: (An Interview)' stands distinctive for its technical eloquence and culturally mediated historical properties. Structurally formed as a dialogue poem, the poem introduces diverse issues on memory in all its aspects i.e. literary, historical, collective, cultural and identity construction in them, nature vs nurture, orientalism etc. through our access to the past that surely bears a cognitive effect on the readers. Emerging out of the mental construction of the poet, the poem proceeds to recreate the past through the historical persona of Walt Whitman. Thus, the poem overcomes the temporal to participate in an enduring cultural tradition. The connotative suggestiveness underlying the poem has moral and philosophical appeal to the readers. A comprehensive assessment of the poem will be made to see how the text has successfully delineated itself as an intersecting point between literary and cultural memory specifically.

Keywords: literary, cultural, memory, identity, history, orientalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Enlightened by the new historic changes facing the world resulted in new dogmas of literary consciousness germinated in the west, popularly recognized as modernist phase in the early decades of the twentieth century, Indian literature also conjures up a modernist sensibility and spirit reflected through its writings of the time. The realization of Ezra Pound's modernist credo "make it new" with its simultaneous contemplation on "return to the past" rejuvenates the Indian literature to sail against conventionality and experiment with structure, form, and content in literary genres. In India, the regional literature across the nation is characteristic of capturing the modernist phenomenon in their writings along with its celebration of the pioneering spirit of the time. The state of Malayalam poetry preceding to K. Ayyappa Paniker was struggling with centuries-old poetic forms devoid of any experimentation and novelty. It was during the 1950s, K. Ayyappa Paniker ushered a new era of modernist poetry along with his contemporaries like Madhavan Ayyappatt and Cheriyan K. Cheriyan.

To give an overview of Paniker's poetry, his poetic creations firmly hold on to a modernist belief. It is through his poetry, Malayalam poetry comes out of its conventional cocoon to the process of transforming into a living organism. His poetry in and out shows this trajectory to unchain Malayalam poetry from the traditional metre usage. He invented, in K. Satchidanandan's words, "metrical collages, rhymeless verse with irregular rhythms, and stylized, as well as sinuous, forthright prose." His consistent experimentation in literary genres shows an amazing range from romantic lyricism, sarcasm and satire, cynicism, dark humour, dramatic monologue, and many others. His poetic pursuit, rich in form and content, serves as an epoch-making phase in Malayalam literature as a whole. Beginning with the seventies, post-modernism grows as the unifying scheme of Paniker's poetry in its reaction to the sentimental idealism, flowery language, and sensuous imagery of conventional poetry.

“I Met Walt Whitman Yesterday: (An Interview)” is one of those finest creations by Paniker that sets the readers into the poet’s poetic affirmations and his poetic visions. The poem, originally written in Malayalam, was translated into English by A.J.Thomas. The poem progresses through the imagination of the poet and reiterates the poet’s sense of the past blended with the present. Readers can find that the poem is charged with memory in its varying forms locating at the centre. This is what that the paper will try to explore in the discussion.

II. THE POEM: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

Structurally, this poem marks an innovative effort on the part of the poet to delineate its form in an unconventional mode i.e. the imaginary interview between two poetic personae but in a reverse mode. It is the subject that raises thought-provoking questions and at the same time unmask the popularly accepted pretentious notions of the society. The poem is a dialogue poem but the dialogues are not set in conventional patterns of narration by the speakers. It is a dialogue between the legendary American poet Walt Whitman who lived and died in 19th century and Paniker who wrote this in late nineties. The poem gets in motion by meeting Whitman in the imagination of the poet who meets him tracing his back to a century ago. At the outset, the readers get in terms with Walt Whitman, standing with a visionary look with his magnanimous poetic posture illuminating the nation for ages. Whitman has a prophetic role to play with the outpourings of his poetry that gave America a distinct voice and identity in literature. It is in this sense, Paniker idealizes him as the ‘poet-patriarch’ of the nation, the bard of America. Beginning his journey from Long Island, Whitman’s birth place, Walt persona loafs around, looks around, and tries to identify himself with the outside world, the people, their mentality and their quest. “Naked Whitman/ Hairy Body/ Grey Beard/ Sparkling Eyes”: the connotative outlook behind this kind of physical posture presents before us the stimulating and grand personality of Whitman who harnesses the nature for a greater cause of human race. The welcoming dialogue starts abruptly: “Hey Whitman! I call out/ My friend-the voice had drawn near”. For the rest the poem is an interior monologue by Paniker and a series of questions by Whitman and mental preoccupations involving the both. The poem has another significant aspect in constituting the poetic point of view from Whitman’s perspective and through Whitman’s vision, Paniker is aiming at a social criticism. Whitman calls America ‘the race of races’ and Columbus’ geographical error proved to be history’s eternal gain.

The intent of the poem gets clearly discernible in the second stanza where through the series of the questions put by Whitman, Paniker is bringing out the paradoxes inherent in Indian mind set in the present days. In and out, the poem adheres to Whitman’s didacticism who cherishes India as the pioneering land in promoting oriental philosophy with its enduring cultural heritage and aesthetic life as to be inculcated by every countryman. Paniker infuses an oriental pride through the poem. He calls for the nation to have a deeper understanding of our cultural diversity, the fact that India is amongst world’s ancient civilizations which pursues a mark of excellence in every field of art, culture, science, architecture, technology etc. and it is in our root that the future prospects of the nation lies. The poet has reflected on the snobbery of average Indian, even the intellectuals who out of their mutual apprehensions could not come out of the halo of western influences. The crippling sense and sensibility of the Indians need to be redirected to our tradition. Paniker, in the same line with Whitman, believes that a nation’s self can be consolidated by exploring the corridors of history and it is in this purpose, both of them have adopted the role of cultural voyager “Come, let’s walk upto the pacific coast” in order to collect and graft elements from the past for use in the present.

III. THE POEM AS A RESERVOIR OF MEMORY CULTURE:

Though the poem presents a fictionalized conversation with Whitman, yet Whitman’s commentary upon medieval and modern Indian’s intellectual pursuit draws a distinctive difference between the two. The poem is innovative not only in its structure or form but also in its spirit. As an exponent of modernist ethics in Indian poetry in general, Paniker draws poetic inspiration from Pound and T.S.Eliot. This poem “I Met Walt Whitman Yesterday: (An Interview)” evocatively synthesizes Pound’s strategy of making it modern by invigorating the past as well as Eliot’s understanding of tradition as “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”. The poem has performed its mnemonic functions to retrieve the past. It has become a receptacle to configurate literary and cultural memory on the same plane. Before analyzing different dimensions of memory culture as reflected in the poem, it is pertinent to discuss what cultural memory has in its relation to Eliot’s version on tradition and individual talent. The immediate object of Eliot’s essay is to define poetic value and originality of one’s own poetic practice. But its implications are extensive in every forms of cultural and literary growth of a nation including history, philosophy,

epistemology, cognition, as well as aesthetic theory and artistic pursuit. Eliot's brilliant commentary on 'past' has two conjunctions, one is a synchronic view of history where the past is free from its temporal limits and of course its diachronic view, where the past is passed. Thus, he emphasizes on cultural memory of a nation or our perception on tradition is central to originality and originality as central to the traditional. The aesthetic growth of the nation cannot dissociate its sensibility from the ancient. The historicity must be handed down but it is one's impersonality to one's literary work that can make him distinct among others.

Growing out of this consciousness to the past or the tradition, the poem takes pride in India's cultural heritage and its transcendental philosophy that influences the West to a great extent. The philosophy that consciousness is unique and all pervading, is the ultimate reality. The common strand between oriental and occidental philosophy is that the reality of the external world depends on how it is perceived by our mind. This process of identification with the outside world begins with a search for the self. The interaction of the person with various objects of nature stimulates the unconscious and the subconscious state of the mind and hereby completes the process of perceiving 'self'. This sense of the ultimate reality is central to transcendental philosophy that largely constitutes the poetic soul of Whitman. Indian philosophy, especially the *Bhagavadgita* carries palpable echo in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

Readers often find a literary work whether a poem or a novel as an intersection between cultural memory and its symbol system. In this poem, Whitman's persona serves as the major symbol system manifested. Whitman realizes that the expression of the American poet has to be transcendent and new at the same time. Whitman's poetry is a fine blend of these two. In his conversation with Paniker, Whitman takes pride on American history and culture as a renaissance of a new phase in timeline. The self of Whitman is beyond empirical experiences like a "long shadow" spreading his presence upon generations of American people. He takes a visionary role who casts his glance from the past to the present and it is in his meeting with Paniker, Whitman admires and owes to India as the hub of great cultural tradition. Whitman raises a series of questions to Paniker that ultimately is presented before the whole nation that can prick our collective consciousness. Literary and cultural memory both are structurally interwoven throughout the poem. Memory is all about the version of the past but it carries with it a sense of the present by ways of 'recollecting', 'revisiting', and 'recreating'. Locating Whitman at the centre of the narrative, it is through him the readers get their way to reflect on cultural revitalization. Memory exists in a text concurrently either to instill a sense of nostalgia and celebration of the past or as a method for constructing individual and cultural identity. Deliberately crafting the poem on a legendary poetic persona, Paniker expands memory culture from individual to collective.

"Our relationship with the past only partially determine who we are in the present", Michael Rothberg comments. It suggests that memory cannot be summed up as only about the past. Our identities are also formed from the interaction with the present or interactions with other memories or simply personal memories. It is at this point that literary memory functions in the poem. However, one cannot distinguish between literary and cultural memory as two water-tight compartments in the text. The readers get a glimpse into the real greatness of Indian knowledge, culture and philosophy that are highly revered in the West. The medieval scholarship, cultural values, philosophical and critical ideas of India have fascinated the legends from the West and these ideas get materialized through their life and works. Whitman is nothing exception to it. Both the poets believe in the doctrine of rebirth of the human soul. A soul can transcend the barriers of time and space. Paniker is not surprised to see Whitman even if the latter had died long ago. Whitman's powerful commentary on the snobbishness of present day Indians also show his dissatisfaction with the existing socio-cultural and political structure of Indian society. India is a land of sages and when the other parts of the world were submerged in ignorance, India was blessed with illuminating minds who pioneered in every field of development including science, history, technology, commerce, literature, and so on. The cultural multiplicity gives rise to a poetics for India. But now Whitman is disturbed to see the ambivalence grappling the minds of Indians today. The complexity of the time results in spiritual barrenness, a strange reluctance of man to engage with history, and proclaiming West as the potential alternative model to look upon and adhere. Paniker identifies with Whitmanian thinking as he seeks an antidote to the disturbed and fragmented Indian mind. Consolidating the world under the epitaph of "basudheiva kutumbakam", our countrymen are now struggling to keep its value intact. This is elicited what Whitman asks, "Do you prefer whites to blacks?". The rapid pace of modernization and divisionary pattern of work culture has structured the society in rigid caste systems. The erstwhile fame of ancient India which once enjoyed the status of as a birthplace of innovative technologies now looks for the West for technical assistance. It brings a sense of irony and pathos for Whitman. In the flux of time, we have

detached ourselves from the spiritual associations that once Indian sages were firmly committed to. Our traditional knowledge which leads India to the peak of excellence has now become an enigma for the average Indians. “Do you have in your land still/ those sages, who,/ eating only their silences,/ counsel their rulers?”. It may be a mockery on the present political scenario of the nation which has undefined goals.

The next question is on the nature of the snobbish Indian visitors who take pains to visit the Niagara as a matter of boast but do not bother to take a sight of the Himalayan caves from where the sages of India get emancipation. Whitman tries to awake the Indian minds to pursue their tradition or their root where lies all origins of truth and prosperity. The Indians have lost a clear perception; “Atom or Atman/ which of these do your scientists/ strive after?”. In Indian thought, Atman is the pure self, without body or shape, all transcending, and free from death and destruction. It leads the human body liberated from the cycle of birth and death and unites it to the ultimate reality. This understanding of true nature of one’s own self is the ultimate pursuit of the transcendentalists, the mystics, and the sages which underlies Whitmanian creative impulse and what he envisions as a poet. The line brings out the duality of our preferences for seeking knowledge. We are not either mastered in rational thinking or metaphysical stuff that once India produced. Paniker hereby involves in a cerebral reawakening project of Indian minds to come out of their abstractions and to inculcate a philosophical insight to the present circumstances. The ancient Indian philosophy is pragmatic in the sense that it is a conglomeration of the rational and the philosophical.

“The glow of/ the Vedic culture of old;/ Emerson, Thoreau, Martin Luther King and I/ have cherished its sweetness; as countless others.” This line has specifically brought out the literary and cultural aspects of memory as an intersection. This shows how the Occidental philosophical system owes its indebtedness to the Oriental philosophical movement initiated by the ancient Vedic culture of India. The Vedic culture flourishing in the Indo-Gangetic Plain had the highest influences in shaping and spreading Hinduism based on the tradition of the Vedas. It has contributed immensely to the world culture in terms of religious philosophy and spiritual speculations. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman all are forerunners of American Transcendentalism while expounding on the ideals of humankind, culture, and relationship of man with nature, they came in touch with the thoughts of the eastern world. Whitman refers to Martin Luther King who was a great civil rights leader also looked for oriental philosophy as his guidance. His search for human liberation gives us his famous contention “truth is the whole”. His expression on civil rights is juxtaposed with what he believes as an existentialist. All these prominent figures from history have showed their utmost faith and cherished the cultural memory of the East pioneered by India. Whitman believes that India serves as the cradle for renaissance in western culture and civilization.

“The earth here speaks of the same things to us./ Those who have ears do not listen.” For Whitman, nature is the supreme entity and it can only be attainable or perceptible through the realization of who “I am” or “the self”. But he is disappointed to see that our quest for the self has no relation to our root. Instead, there is an intellectual void growing in its place. Whitman calls for a new structure, but an integral structure, characterized by the integration of the past structures to evolve a higher form of human consciousness. It will lead to our collective intelligence and advancement.

The last stanza of the poem is an enunciation of nature and culture on the same plane. It shows a movement from divinity of nature stored in natural objects like grass, river, hills, clouds, woods to the comprehension of modernization shaping the external world. All these external realities serve as storehouse of cultural memory. The discoveries, inventions, cultural beliefs, food and dress, the real, and the fancied all are part of this cultural memory. Out of all these business of life, Whitman and Paniker want to extricate their transcendental self. It is in this sense, the poem ends on an optimistic note: “Come, let’s walk upto the Pacific coast.” Whitman appeals here not only to Paniker, rather it is a call for the whole nation, to the larger race of human kind to accompany him in a self-seeking journey to resurrect their soul. To the sides of the Pacific coast where lies the seeds of ancient civilizations and the Indological philosophical and religious doctrines that enlighten the whole world.

The poem can be analyzed in different layers and multiple interpretations can be generated through each layer. The poem is an exordium of literary and cultural memory. The literary memory alludes to the Whitmanesque touch in the poem. Whitman’s citation in the poem as the subject seeking answers and guiding the lost generations of Indians forms the crux of the poem. Through a literary persona, the readers get a deeper understanding of cultural vitality that we possess once and a boost for cultural revitalization. It is a demystification of the present to enhance an enlightened mystification of our soul.

IV. CONCLUSION:

This poem uses the medium of celebration of memory as a potential tool to rejuvenate the Indian countrymen especially, their literary scholarship and pursuit of wisdom from the present disillusionment. Paniker is of the view that any human race should accept the new within the framework of the old. It is not like that one has to confine himself only to the past heritage, yet he is not also propagating to lose our legacy and root, what Eliot and Pound consider. It is in this idea that the poem celebrates memory as a constructive way to instill a realization of the self as well as of the nation.

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