

# C.P. CAVAFY'S POEMS INCLUDE HIDDEN STRUCTURES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY ALONG WITH AESTHETIC IDEOLOGIES, WHICH PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN READING HIS LITERARY WORKS, ANALYSED BY LAYING EMPHASIS ON *ITHAKA*.

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**Abstract** - This paper will attempt to do a gender study of C.P. Cavafy's poem, laying emphasis on *Ithaka*, and how gender and sexuality plays a very important role on all of his prominent works. Most of his works heavily asserts a gender to his themes and further talks about the philosophy through the perspective of that particular gender which has been attributed. Even though he had a very uneventful life, his works were full of energy and excitement. Cavafy lived through literary work and gives all his readers escape from their dull and monotonous life. Even though being a historical poet, he links aesthetic ideology appropriately making him a widely read poet till today. This paper aims to do an analytical study, finding structures of gender and sexuality in his work and how it has affected his thinking, which in turn has influenced million others, referring to scholars like Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Luce Irigaray. Through this paper, we can observe how C.P. Cavafy submitted to as well as subverted from the gender stereotypes laid by the society and how it plays an important role in reading his literary works. Cavafy is widely read poet across all generations and has influenced several minds across all cultures, hence it is important to observe how gender and sexuality has influenced his works.

So, we observe that C.P. Cavafy's poems include hidden structures of gender and sexuality along with aesthetic ideologies, which plays an important role in reading his literary works, some of which is ventured further into this paper, analysed by laying emphasis on *Ithaka*.

## Introduction

C.P. Cavafy is a prominent Greek poet of Alexandrian time period. His name very much suited his entire life style and is known as a Historical Poet, but not because of the theme he used, but because of the choice of his words. He lets the imagination of the readers flow and not restricts them. The tonality of his writing is what makes him distinct from all other writers of his time period. The simple choice of words helps the readers paint a picture for themselves and makes it every reader's individual poem.

C.P. Cavafy's poems have survived better even in changing times because they relate the past and present. The theme may be drawn from the past, but also imparts modernist aestheticism which imparts an overarching spiritual knowledge to cope up with modern day lifestyle. Hence bridges the gap between poets of the past and poets of the present, portraying interest and knowledge of the past, and ideologies of the present, making it relatable to every reader across all times.

C.P. Cavafy's poems have been translated into many languages. Translators have engaged heavily with his work and the translations have gone through several changes over the course of time. This suggests that Cavafy's work is widely debated in the intellectual domain and is taken interest in, and worked and reworked on, which means people have taken interest in his works always and never have had enough of engagement with his work. Cavafy has not faded away from the minds of the readers. It has stood the test of time, which is why is considered to be a canon.

Modern artists take inspirations from Cavafy's works as well. Green Day's most popular album, *The American Idiots*, has the widely circulated song *21 Guns*, which draws ideas from Cavafy's poem, *Ithaka*. Similarly, several novelists start their work with Cavafy's poem in the beginning. One such novel is Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir*, which starts with *Ithaka*. Bollywood has also been at par to impart ideas from Cavafy's work, one such is the song *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*, which has a line inspired from *Ithaka*. To personalise his work further, Cavafy uses a touch of gender and sexuality in all his works, sometimes submitting to, sometime subverting from the gender stereotypes created by the society. Cavafy is one of the most widely read poets of all generations and has influenced minds across all cultures, hence it is important to ponder how gender and sexuality has influenced his works.

It is believed that *Ithaka* was first composed by C.P. Cavafy in the year 1894. Cavafy revised the literary work in the year 1910, and it was printed for the first time in the year 1911. The English translation was first done in the year 1924, and there have been various distinctive interpretations from that point forward. This poetry can be found in Cavafy's *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis, Princeton University Press, 1980.

*Ithaka* is an unrhymed poem consisting five paragraphs that use very simple and regular dialect. The storyteller, most probably a man who has been to many places in his lifetime, addresses either Odysseus, the protagonist of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, or a present day explorer or traveller who is the work of imagination. The narrator tells the explorer that Ithaka is not the most important part, his island home that was the destination of Odysseus' years of travelling, is not what that matters, what matters is the journey itself to his home, which has given him a lifetime of experience. The travel must have been completely relished at every moment, utilizing every aspect of difficulties and intellect, because of the fact that the objective itself is probably going to be a disappointment. So he says that we should not lose hope and wonder if the destination was worth it. It indeed was because it has given us the beautiful journey we have learnt from and grown with.

The poem starts by addressing its readers with 'you', clearly giving a piece of advice. It is rhymed and written in everyday language. The poem goes along very smoothly, which signifies the hurdles one needs to overcome on any tough journey. The lines differ in their length, which signify that the journey is unexpected and follows no pattern. But each line delivers a piece of advice, much like how each event on the journey teaches a new lesson.

C.P. Cavafy is widely celebrated and known for being one of the finest of present day Greek writers. *Ithaka* is one of his best known poems and is considered to express his outlook on life.

*Ithaka* carries heavy notions of gender and sexuality in itself. As Judith Butler says in *Gender Troubles*, gender is performative, similarly, *Ithaka* being a very feminine name has qualities usually attributed towards the female gender, that is, nurturing, caring, motivating, and like the efforts of a woman confined in domestic circle is often neglected, similarly *Ithaka* is also neglected. The narrator urges the traveller to not feel disappointed upon reaching *Ithaka*, because it has given him the beautiful journey, which suggests that maybe, other travellers have been disappointed in *Ithaka* before upon reaching, hence the need to write a poem and urging to value it has arrived, just like nature, which is also synonymous to women.

His other famous poems include *Walls*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *This is He*, *One Night*, etc, all of which carry certain notions of gender and identity, just like *Ithaka*.

So, we observe that C.P. Cavafy's poems include hidden structures of gender and sexuality along with aesthetic ideologies, which plays an important role in reading his literary works, some of which is ventured further into this paper, analysed by laying emphasis on *Ithaka*.

### Literature Review

In *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 96-103, published by Wilson Quarterly, the author says that the name Constantine Cavafy suited him the best because his life was always constant. He lived in the same place almost his entire life, did the same job, and almost all his poems have the same theme. Cavafy called himself a "Historical Poet". According to the author, Cavafy was well aware of all the prominent poets and authors of his time, as well had knowledge of all the prominent events. He believes that Cavafy was not a historical poet because of the theme he used, but precisely because of the choice and use of words in his writing. His themes rather make it problematic to put his work in any high school text book. Cavafy was a different poet than other poets of his time. They mostly believed in the existence of a sardonic reader who, they imagine, react to every action of a poet. The two prominent methods which they heavily used are irony, and objectification, both of which lower the standard and quality of the work. Cavafy's poem instead focused on tonality, which allows the readers to focus on not only the history of the nation, but also relate it to his existence and review his own past. He gave the readers an option where they could paint their own images and learn about themselves from his work.

Cavafy was not very ambitious and hence never bothered to publish his poems. He circulated them in pamphlets, hence did not allow or entertain much criticism of the literary critics. He was satisfied with whatever recognition he got from his low-profile work. His work started to be analysed by critics after his death. As the author believes, the usage of simple words opens up the imagination of the readers which makes Cavafy a great a poet. He does not suggest that how much beautiful or what kind of beauty it is, he suffices just by saying beautiful and the reader can paint the picture on the canvas however he wants to. That is how every poem becomes each reader's individual poem.

In *Translation and Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn, 2008), pp. 267-270, Konstantina Georganta says that Cavafy's poems has been translated in several languages across all these years several times. She also says that W.H. Auden argues that the voice of Cavafy's poem makes it as easy or as difficult to a person not familiar to the cultural scenario the poet belongs as much to a person familiar to the cultural scenario. Seamus Heaney believes that Cavafy's poems survive translation because of his unique tone which is more of his personal style than a way of Greek traditional writing. They have further survived better even in changing times because they relate the past and present beautifully. For example, in the poem *Ithaka*, the theme in central around the story of a Greek hero, this is drawn from the past. The poem also contains modernist aestheticism, promotes individualism, and imparts a value to the readers, a larger overarching spiritual idea to cope up with modern day lifestyle, where we always wonder if any effort is worth putting and analyse the result we might get even before we start with the job. Cavafy tells us that any destination which gives us hardships and the journey towards it is always worth fighting for and we should never be disappointed if we do not get our desired result in the end, because the journey to it is the greatest achievement we can have. Hence, Cavafy bridges the gap between the poets of the past and the poets of the present. He has true interest and knowledge about the past, but he also imparts his aesthetic ideologies, which makes it more relatable to the modern readers.

The author renders through the different translations Cavafy's poems have gone through in all these years. Translators have experimented and changed their words as they have engaged more and more with it. For example, the poem *Ithaka*, in July 1924, it appears in *The Criterion* in G. Valassopoulou's version:

When you start on the way to Ithaca,  
Wish that the way be long,

Full of adventure, full of knowledge.  
 In 1951, Mavrogordato renders this as:  
 Setting out on the voyage to Ithaka  
 You must pray that the way be long,  
 Full of adventures and experiences.

In 1961 the voyage full of 'experiences' is transformed again into 'knowledge' by Rae Dalven, followed by Alike Barnstone. The Keeley-Sherrard revised edition of 1992 has: As you set out for Ithaka hope the voyage is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery.

'Havias' new rendering is:  
 When you set out on your way to Ithaka you should hope that your journey is a long one:  
 A journey full of adventure, full of knowledge.

These changes in translation have occurred only because people got involved and engaged with it and did not forget it over all these years. These changes in translations suggest that Cavafy is still a widely read poet and has not faded away from the minds of scholars and readers who read for leisure. Ithaka is not the only work which has been translated over and over.

His other poems like *The God abandons Anthony*, *Return Often*, or *Come Back*, etc, have gone through similar changes and have attracted the translators in every generation. This makes Cavafy's work a canon, which has stood the test of time and still continues to fascinate and interest his readers even after several years of his death.

In *Reading Cavafy*, by Robert Pinsky, the author appreciates the intensity of intimacy in his works, and believes that that is one of the prominent reasons why C.P. Cavafy is such a widely read and loved author. The author focuses on the theme of *Body, Remember*, a widely circulated poem by Cavafy, and marvels at how Cavafy is a fantastic story teller, and how he stimulates his readers' imagination to the point where they not only read poetry, but also can see a movie about it in their head. Cavafy's memories bridges the gap between centuries, and personal touch connects the readers of all times. This author, like many others, also appreciates the simplicity of the language of Cavafy's poems and feels that there is a musical rhythm to it, which is absent in Cavafy's contemporaries. The author talks about Ben Johnson and Elizabeth

Bishop, who are such great poets due the usage of idioms and ornaments, but it is surprising how Cavafy's uses nothing of that sort, yet is able to win the heart of millions across so many ages.

He next takes the example of some other works by Cavafy, such as *He Swears*, and *Poseidonians*, where he feels that Cavafy deals with history, as well as culture, parallelly, which is another brilliant thing about his work.

He appreciates translations of Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard who have managed to withhold the charm of Cavafy's works even after translation. The author feels that they have done perfect justice to him. He further explores the *Bandaged Shoulder*, *Craftsmen of Wine Bowls*, etc, which arguable makes him one of the finest artists of his time. The author from all these explorations of Cavafy's works conclude that he is an extremely diverse poet, where some of his work follow no pattern, while some others sound like music. Cavafy, according to him is one of his kind.

### Relevance in Present Scenario

Many modern day artists take inspiration from Cavafy's works, particularly Ithaka. After we reach our destination or goal, we often wonder if it was worth all the pain it has caused us.

Green Day's song, *21 Guns*, from the album *American Idiot*, ponders on this idea.

"Do you know what's worth fighting for?  
 When it's not worth dying for?  
 Does it take your breath away?  
 And you feel yourself suffocated?"

That is when Cavafy's poem answers this question. The destination was only a push which made us go through all the struggle and has made us the people we are. Hence, any destination or goal which provides us with prolonged hardship and a journey we can learn from is always worth fighting for. It makes us push our limits and leads us to a path of self discovery. Like *Ithaka*, no destination fools us; it only enriches our knowledge with the journey.

Modern day writer Paulo Coelho also draws heavily from ideas of Cavafy's poems. One of his novels, *The Zahir*, starts with the poem *Ithaka*. 'Zahir' means obsession. The protagonist's obsession to find his wife leads him on a journey where he discovers himself and his love for her. When he reached his destination, that is, when he found his wife, he found her pregnant with someone else's child. He was heartbroken, yet he knew that 'Ithaka', or the 'Zahir', or the destination, which was his wife, did not deceive him, but instead helped him understand himself better. Hence he became more wise and full of experiences.

Bollywood has not been left behind either to take inspiration from Cavafy's poem.

Several lyrics of songs suggest the idea proposed in Ithaka. One such very popular song released in the year 2016, is the title track of the film *Ae Dilhai Mushkil*. The song is written by Amitabh Bhattacharya, directed by Pritam, and sung by Arijit Singh, was one of the hits of that year. The lyrics suggests "*Safarkhoobsurathaimanzil se bhi*", which means that the journey is more beautiful than the destination. Hence everything which gains us experience is always worth the fight. The gift of every destination is the journey itself.

To make his works more personal, Cavafy adds a touch of gender to all his poems. For example, in the poem *Ithaka*, Ithaka is a very feminine name, suggesting a destination which gives a very homely feeling, just like a stereotypical female personality. But people often fail to give due credits to this caregiving female gender and often feel that she is not worth putting up any effort. But Cavafy says that the love for this homely feeling and caregiver has driven us to reach to her, and she is worth every effort because she gave us the journey which we learnt so much from. We should not be disheartened if we come back and do not receive the glory



we expected from her, she has exhausted it protecting and watching out for us while we were on the journey. Hence now is the time we be thankful to her and give back the love and care she deserves.

### Connection to Theories

As Judith Butler says in *Gender Trouble*, the fundamental difference between sex and gender is that sex is naturally given, while gender is socially acquired, in other words, gender is performative, that is, the activities one perform in their daily life determines their gender, while sex is what one is born with. This can help us answer the question why *Ithakais* such a feminine name. *Ithaka* is this place which has a nurturing, caring, and motivating nature, much like a mother, which attributes a female gender to it. Females are also most neglected, and attributes as such mentioned above are not considered to be real contributions, these efforts a female puts is often dismissed as they are considered to be overly emotional beings. The narrator requests the traveller to not be disappointed with *Ithaka*, which suggests that perhaps, people were disappointed with it earlier and did not realise what it is worth. Hence the narrator wrote a poem, like poems are written to save nature, or the country, because being of a feminine gender, they are neither able to protect themselves, nor stand up for themselves. Hence, C.P. Cavafy determines the activities of the theme of each of his work, and subtly assign a gender to it.

Judith Butler's ideas are extended from Foucault's ideologies. Butler's famous

Performative Theory of Gender is heavily drawn from Foucault's theory, "Discipline and Punish", where Foucault challenges the ideas of soul and body we have always believed in. In most cultures, it is believed that soul is trapped in the body and the body is only a mortal being, but soul is eternal. Once the mortal body dies, soul is free. But Foucault says the vice versa of it, that is, the body is trapped in the soul. This idea of Foucault, which Butler extends, is that the wants and needs of the soul is passed through the body and acted upon the body. Hence, the soul is lying deep down somewhere, trapped in the body. The activities of the body affect the soul and moulds it accordingly. Hence gender is the part which acts upon the body, depending upon the various restrictions and social constructions the society has set for us, while sex acts directly upon the soul, which often does not get to express itself if it is conflicting with the social constructs. According to them, this leads to the existence of binaries such as masculinity and femininity, or heterosexuality and homosexuality.

It is interesting to note that C.P. Cavafy's works reflects both, some of them seem to submit to what the social constructions allow, like *Ithaka*, while some subvert from these constructions, like *This is He*.

In the poem, the narrator talks about a man who is a stranger in the new land, and the evident thing about him is that he writes. He is very emotionally attached to his works and have written all of them with great efficiency. But after contributing so immensely to the literary circle, he is extremely tired no, and nothing fascinates him anymore, every activity seems like torture to him. However, deep down in his mind he has a memory which he can never get over with.

The description of the male given here is somewhat 'effeminate', according to the social standards. He is uncomfortable in a new land, which is lack of bravery, he is emotional as well, and puts on a lot of effort to complete his work, which is again, not a physical job, which is expected from a man by the society. He is tired and frustrated of everything, which is unlikely for a man to do, as some unrealistic standards has been set for men that they should be ready to work wherever and whenever. Last, but not the least, all that is left with him now is a distant memory, which is again 'unmanly', because men are not supposed to be emotional and hold on to memories. Here, C.P. Cavafy's utterly shatters the stereotypical idea about gender which is created socially. He instead lets the soul unveil itself and be whatever it wants to be, however it wants to be. It is no longer bound by the body, unlike in C.P. Cavafy's other works like *Ithaka*, in which it is evidently expressed that his soul is trapped in the body and hence follows social constructs.

The presence of gender and sexuality is evident in C.P. Cavafy's work, there is no denying that, but what has influenced him is a major doubt. According to Foucault, the Greek had an an interesting way to emphasize rules and regulations on its citizens. The codes of conduct were never put into penal codes by the hegemonic institutions, instead it was connected to the idea to the idea of self and conscience, which definitely promoted guilt if one is not following the codes of conduct, and hence, self penalisation. It was believed that no one but only the conscious self can prevent a person from getting carried away into things which are undesirable to the society. Hence, Greek people did not apply a singular idea of sexuality to its citizens, unlike what we do today. According to Foucault, he rather attributes the Greek ideologies to the term *Aphrodisia*, which is like many other forms loosely translated to artistic use of pleasure. The did not need to bind sexual identities to particular "socially acceptable forms" like we do. Foucault names this process of identifying sexuality as "the aesthetics of existence".

This type of cultural practice around C.P. Cavafy might has been the reason to the ambiguous ideas of gender roles he portrays in his work, which suggests openness towards different ideas and freedom to explore and not be just one particular character.

### Conclusion

It is extremely crucial to have a look at the factors which influence C.P. Cavafy's works because they have been widely read across centuries and across cultures. His works has been translated to innumerable languages, and till date inspires a lot of artists across the globe. Cavafy is an poet who connects the past with the present and history with culture, which is a widely accepted opinion of several literary critics and translators.

It is interesting to see how notions of gender and sexuality is present in most of his works, which personnalises them and make them relatable. However, C.P. Cavafy dodges between submitting to and subverting from gender roles and identity in his works, in some he submits to the societal constructions, while in some others, he subverts from them. Judith Butler and Michel Foucault's theories rightly explains the existence of such notions in Cavafy's works, though it is still not certain if he himself was aware of the

influence. Nonetheless, ideas of masculinity and femininity, or heterosexual and homosexual were created and broken through his works.

Cavafy's works also suggest that an individual entity does not necessarily has to stick to one sexual identity in all his or her life. A person should be allowed and given the space to explore and figure out the best for himself or herself at the point in time, if it means changing gender roles over a period of time, be it. A person should be satisfied with their existence at the end of the day and not feel burdened.

Apart from assigning gender, which definitely personalises his works, the other factors which play a major role in his widespread popularity in the choice of language, which is extremely simplistic and contains no ornamental language. His themes are also very different from what his contemporaries wrote, making him the poet of the common man, and not just scholars.

Even though he had a very uneventful life, his works were full of energy and excitement. Cavafy lived through literary work and gives all his readers escape from their dull and monotonous life. Even though being a historical poet, he links aesthetic ideology appropriately making him a widely read poet till today.

It is hard to accept that such influential writer also confused between gender roles and failed to take stance, such deeply rooted these ideologies are in our hearts. But societal constructs can be broken with proper awareness, which this paper aims to create, aiming towards a more liberal world where anyone can be anything.

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