

C D Narasimaiah's views on Indian English literature

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Introduction: This paper critically examines the views and suggestions of C.D.Narasimhaiah especially on Indian English literature and Language that he has expressed in his speeches and introductory talks delivered on various occasions. He addressed these to the faculty of English literature and languages as well as to the students of kinds of literature in other languages. His deliberations revolve around Indian English literature i.e. the literature (poetry, fiction) produced by The Indian English writers on an Indian theme. Time and again C.D. Narasimhaiah brings comparative observations of Indian literature, British literature, American literature and other new kinds of literature in English. But his main interest is Indian literature in English.

The critical responses of Narasimhaiah are of a mixed idiom of New Criticism and a confessional new approach to the Indian – English writing as a necessity. We can distinguish his critical responses from that of F.R.leavis- method of revaluation of a strict critical standard juxtaposed by a certain amount of concession. Naasimhaiah's attitude could be summed as a sophisticated critical attitude at one level and at the other level a scholar who is trying to explore a mixed novelty of the East and West. Professor Narasimhaiah's concessions to Indian –English writers are his judgments, the best English writers in the subtle use of language, a response that is always on a certain ground of reasoning. However, revaluation, westernized sophistication and passionate 'inside' probe into the language along with the background of the writers, from the chief responses of his writings.

Narasimhaiah's criticism of literature and language can be divided into two types:

- (1) Theoretical exposition of the merits & defense of the English writing, and thus championing of the writing:
- (2) Practical criticism as evinced in various studies by individual works and authors

Narasimhaiah has played a significant role in winning attention for Indian literature in English, with his publications as well as by organizing seminars bringing together critics and educators. He was instrumental in introducing Indian universities. This was the period when Narasimhaiah actively participated in the formulation of English literature and to increase the awareness of the other forms of English literature from around the world. He advised the critics not to speak

in abstraction but to the English critic F.R. Leavis. He went beyond the criteria Leavis suggested and applied it to the works of literature of English, America, West India, Canada, Africa, Australia and of course India. He popularized the ideas of Leavis through his pioneering works in India. If Leavis spent his critical energies on constructing/identifying an essence called 'Englishness,' Narasimhaiah's efforts were directed towards presenting a construct called 'Indianness'.

Narasimhaiah's interest in Sanskrit poetics was perhaps heightened by this intention to 'Identify' an Indianness that is comparable to the Englishness that had become the basis of the paradigm in literary interpretation and evaluation that Leavis had proposed with a remarkable degree of success. Narasimhaiah was fascinated by Indian poets/critics like Bharata, Dandin, Bhamaha, Vamana to Kuntaka, Anandavardhana, Adhinavagupta, Kshemendra, Rajeshekhara and Viswanatha, and their terms 'Rasa, Riti, Guna, Alankara, Aucity, Dhvani and Rasanubhava (the imaginative experience of a work of art)'. He presented these as important criteria for identifying Indianness in a literary work. For Narasimhaiah, critics have a 'Swadharmā', and they must cultivate and nature this. He defines 'swadharmā, for the critic:

"Let me at once comment that this Sanskrit term like many others, has today acquired sentimental associations by mouthing it impotently during the years of our subjection to British rule, instead of revitalizing it through practice in literature and life, for only then could we have absorbed and assimilated what we borrowed and made for organic growth. Such indeed is the working of the organic principle".

The other term/concept he employs in his criticism is Purushartha-s, which denotes ends or values. There are four types of ends/values: Dharma, Artha (wealth), Kama (desire, generally, but particularly used in respect of sex and by extension love of art and literature) and Moksha (liberation of the self from the bondage of the world). Parama Purushartha is the ultimate end of life, which is the attainment of self-realization. This value is crucial to Narasimhaiah's criticism. In his view, it was only after the beginning of the Christian era that the concept of Moksha and Mukti began to take shape in the Indian literary writings.

About Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata can be seen in most of his critical works. He constantly tries to allude the work of an artist to the great Indian epics. He also employs concepts/terms like Pradhanarasa, Rasa-dhvani, prayojana, and purushartha to analyze and evaluate contemporary works of art. He emphasizes that aesthetic pleasure- rasa should be awakened in a reader.

“The mind of the responsive reader is attuned to the emotional situation as portrayed in the work of art 9hrdaya samvada), is then absorbed (tanmayata) in its portrayal and this absorption results in rasanubhava (experience of aesthetic pleasure).”¹

He finds McDougall referring to the sthayibhavas, and compares Keats’ notion of the evaporation of opposites with sukha-duhkha dichotomy and their synthesis in the experience of a work of art. He also finds Shakespeare’s play King Lear answering to the Indian Value system².

But this is not done to assert the superiority of Indian aesthetics alone. The object of comparison is not to prove one’s superiority over the other but feel fortified in the validity and adequacy of our value system or, when necessary, to provide correctives to our narrowness and dogmatism, for we can learn more from differences than from affinities.

He cites the example of Eliot’s ‘The Cocktail Party’ to show what he means by relating literary works of the West to our own experience. He uses Indian terms like Samaja kalyana or loka kalyana (one who has renounced life) to analyze the experience of the major character in the play, Celia. Narasimhaiah contrasts Celia’s desire to find salvation with Krishna’s advice to Arjuna in Mahabharata, where the former says to the latter: “There is nothing in all the three worlds which I desire, but I cannot cease to act”,³ Through this juxtaposition, Narasimhaiah argues that Eliot’s use of the word ‘anti-life’ for Celia is not correct, as she has taken it upon herself to serve the others, a difficult kind of life.

His comment on T.S.Eliot’s concluding lines “shanthi, shanthi, shanthi” in ‘The Waste Land’ is also instructive:

“Not only is it a benediction but the dominant emotion of The Waste Land, the pradhana rasa, a far cry from the charge that it is a poem of disillusionment, not any more than the Mahabarata, where Santa is the pradhana (dominant)rasa”.⁴

Narasimhaiah’s comment stands in sharp relief against both Leavis’s charge the Eliot has used the term without a full appreciation of its value, which is ‘ironical’, and some Indian readers’ blind adoration of it.

¹ Narasimhaiah, C D, Moving Frontiers of English Studies in India, New Delhi, S Chand and Company Ltd, 1997, Page no 89.

² Narasimhaiah, C D, The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature, Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages, 1986, page no:16.

³ Narasimhaiah, C D, The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature, Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages, 1986, page no:35

⁴ Ibid, page no:32

Thus, Narasimhaiah's practical criticism corroborates his programmatic statement that a criticism that does not take note of one's value system is condemned to be fragmentary, irrelevant, it not a futile activity. He urges Indian critics not only to be aware of this but also to practice (abhyasa) this in their interpretation/evaluation of literary texts.

The discussion above only suggests what Narasimhaiah's ideal Indian critic should not do. He/she can neither afford to bask in the glory of the literary achievements of the past nor allow himself/herself to be overwhelmed by Western literature and criticism. His program for the Indian critics and readers of English literature needs to be outlined in specific terms.

In his view, a comparative study of the literature of the world is the best way to arrive at standards and break open both cultural cringe and parochialism. Narasimhaiah's efforts were directed towards this goal. For instance, he compares Eliot's remark on 'Impersonality', 'Objective Correlative' and 'United sensibility' with similar concepts/terms in Indian poetics. Objective correlative is compared to Bharata's vibhavas, and 'impersonal art' with the seminal Indian view that God is the supreme artificer (visvakarma), and that the poet must of concentration (dhyana) and abhyasa (practice) learn to utter his incantation (dhyana mantra).⁵

Ananda Coomaraswamy is a critic who comes close to Narasimhaiah's ideal critic. Narasimhaiah relies on Coomaraswamy to support his claim that Aristotle's Mimesis and Art as Imitation are not the same. Art is not imitation, but something learned by sadrsya, from what is seen, felt, lives. It was 'precept of the concept' for Coomaraswamy, which was similar to that of Plato's 'Idea' that dwells in Heaven, Devanagari, which he visits in his dreams. So the individual artist becomes a 'catalytic agent'- nimittamatra.

Narasimhaiah's comments on the Blackmur's essay 'Between the Numen and the Moha: Towards a Theory of literature' (in *The Lion and The Honeycomb*) is another example of this attempt to compare Indian and Western aesthetics. Blackmur uses Numen (a Latin term) in place of the Indian Absolute or Brahman and gave us a theory of literature. "Numen is a Divine will, (daivechha, in Indian terms) that moves us, overwhelms us, or in Longinus's language, the blow that transforms us. Religion has taken it, not as an action, but as a spring of action. Numen enters behavior and gets transformed, deflected, degraded into that privation of humanity that he calls Moha, the cow that has right of way in Indian traffic!- uncontrollable behavior, which tends to absorb and defile both the chill and fire of the spirit."⁶

⁵ Narasimhaiah, C D, *The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature*, Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages, 1986, page no:39

⁶ Narasimhaiah, C D, *The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature*, Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages, 1986, page no:40

Narasimhaiah urges the Indian scholar to compare Aurobindo's poetics with that of the two American critics, Eliot and Blackmur. He is certain that such a comparison will make it obvious to this critic that Indian literary criticism has all the theory and the practice that is needed for its satisfactory function today for us to pursue and to achieve the standard from in Indian English literature.

Narasimhaiah's appropriation of Leavis's criticism is an interesting example of a critic carving out a position from which to attempt a comparative study. He examines Leavis' concepts of man, society, and civilization, which had served the English critic's purpose adequately, and find them wanting. To the Indian critic, Narasimhaiah would say, all the three worlds are his society, (swadesobhuvanatrayam). As for 'civilization', he does not consider it either as a primary category or as an absolute. Perhaps for Indians, it could be Man, World and God or Reality with our deep longing for the Absolute-deva kama. So, he emphasizes that the critical appreciation should be done 'In an attitude of detachment' by creating 'a critical climate' which he has strived to create over the years.

He appreciates Aurobindo for his superior critical skills and commenting on his 'Future Poetry' and the three volumes of correspondence, Narasimhaiah attempts to demonstrate how Indian criticism could have functioned with self-respect and relevance to our context. Aurobindo spoke of Milton's 'grandiose epic chant', his 'unredeemed intellectuality'. As for the Augustans, Aurobindo observes- 'not the gold of poetry' but 'a well-gilt copper coin of a good currency, 'which' turns to monotonous brilliance of language'. And of Wordsworth who was admired by all, he says 'he states too much, sings too little' and he is 'like an automobile running on insufficient petrol'. For Blacke and Coleridge 'open magical gates'. Shelley wanted the 'ascetic element of tapasya', Tennyson is a 'perilous model' and that Lawrence was a 'yogi' who had missed his way, hence his 'vain and baffled sexuality'.⁷

In Narasimhaiah's analysis of the current situation in Indian English literary criticism, the main source of the problem is the hangover from the colonial rule. Under the colonial rule, we tended to look up to the Western styles and then to the European styles for our writing and looks through their eyes, both of which led to a compulsion that made us depend on Western critical criteria and even values to deal with our literature and stopped us to explore for other Indian alternatives. This led to decay in our minds and creativity, which made our art and literature repetitive. This formed a

⁷ Narasimhaiah, C D, The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature, Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages, 1986, page no:39

background for the working party to meet in June 1984, to formulate a common poetic and as to how it could be put to practice. To do so, the then-existing framework of poetic was taken in to make it suit the genius of India and

- (i) Preserve our link with tradition and foster a sense of continuity;
- (ii) Assimilate the best elements in Western criticism;
- (iii) Be capable of facilitating completeness of response to current works of literature.

Narasimhaiah encouraged these efforts and contributed to them through his writings. To achieve a certain standard in Indian English literature and criticism, a need for a pan-Indian poetics is necessary. Like individuals, nations tend to search for values when there is a threat to what they live by. This thirst for the values saw a kind of conflict on the surface at least, between Hindu revivalism and imitation of the west. The search was largely in the areas of religion and Philosophy- in religion because it has always been central to Indian life and represented in inclusive consciousness. All the forms of art, literature, politics, economics and social reform were in close touch with religion and Indian culture. But this was peripheral and not in depth. Even Sanskrit literature gained more attention from the British rather than the Indians. The British orientalist who had no knowledge of the literary values did the work of translations of the Vedas, Upanishads and Sanskrit drama. Here comes the role of the Indian critics to bring out their true Indianness to focus.

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