



C D Narasimaiah's Critical Interpretation on Teaching of English Literature in Indian Context

Dr.K. Rajesh, Associate Professor of English

Department of Humanities & Science

Guru Nanak Institutions Technical Campus, Autonomous,

Hyderabad, India

Email:cclrajesh@gmail.com, Mobile no: 98857 66461.

Introduction

This paper discusses the literary pedagogy that C D Narasimhaiah envisaged. It discusses the role of the teacher in teaching English Literature, the role of the student, the interaction between the two, and lastly the process of evaluation. C.D. Narasimhaiah's views on each of the aspects are dealt with in some detail. His views on poetry, prose, criticism and the techniques to be used are discussed. His concept or Indianness is also focused upon. These would clear most of our doubts, which have been lingering in our minds for quite a long time. Comparison between old and new syllabus, old and new methods of pedagogy, the intellectual and maturity of the students, etc have been fully described for our reference.

PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING LITERATURE:

TEXTS:

Before going on to comment on how the texts should be in the Indian curriculum, it is useful to recall the practice in the past. It was only after independence that India had come into contact with the other nations and the trends of English language and literature as India was cut off from the rest of the world for more than

100 years. The latest publications in English did not reach India immediately after publication. Since they were at snail's speed, there were no up-to-date literary periodicals worth the name available to the universities or the students in India. Though the books came at a later period, they did not make an impact on the Indian readers' since their views had already been molded by exposure to the books available to them.

It is amazing to know that Indian scholars are at home for little more than a decade with American literature as with British literature, which has been with us for a hundred years. Indian critics, writers, and readers began to discuss the new arrivals with a lot of interest and began to see how the new world countries shaped great literature for the future. Through examination, one could observe that both the American and the Indian had points of similarity as well as difference. The similarity being that Americans had a colonial period that was later awakened by their parochialism and nationalism. Likewise, it was after independence that India opened up for the other kinds of literature, which had no importance before. It also meant widening the horizon on the one hand and self-examination on the other.

American books were in any case hidden behind the broad back of Great Britain. But it was after Independence that the Indians started showing enthusiasm in American literature and reached out for these books instead of learning about them through English literary studies. Modern French poetry and criticism that had done so much to change the course of English poetry and criticism in the early of this century was a sealed book to the English educated Indian.

Narasimhaiah opines that, “outside the mainstream of Indo-English relations, the only two possible sources of vitality or influence are the New Critics of America and Symbolist poets of France, both of whom had the potency to change the literary scene in India-were inaccessible to us”¹. Indians were suddenly introduced to other works of literature, which made critical thinking and creative writing. They also felt the importance of other works of literature to score them with ideas and to increase their creative thinking. Indians could feel that if Eliot's poetry had been introduced to Indian poets much before it was done, Indian poetry would have experienced the modern poetry and modern criticism much before the English and the Americans

¹ Narasimhaiah, C.D., *Moving Frontiers of English Studied in India*, (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company Ltd., 1997)page no:30.

did. We did learn a lot from other foreign poets and writers likes Richard, Eliot, and Leavis. We learn to reject stock-responses, talk to literature and art in terms of value judgments, and distinguish between 'emotive' and 'referential' language.

It has been observed that 'English' in India historical relic, or another post-colonial 'mimic' activity. The English from the West was considered as the standard one and scholars nor the academicians ever bothered to look at the other forms of literature from different countries. This scenario prolonged for a long time. It was only after the advent of the nineteenth century that English was on the progressive stride with the introduction of Commonwealth literature, Indian writings, and comparative literature.

This scene could be changed by way of creativity, a new approach to the English language, and literature. The very thought of imitating other forms of literature and their styles should be apprehended and streamlined to better creativity in all the forms of literature such as poetry, prose, and criticism works. The Indian readers looked upon poetry as a matter of feeling and emotion (spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and 'emotions recollected in tranquility') rather than thought. Narasimhaiah states that poetry should be studied and felt at from the poet's point of view and no more by the reader's own. Place and time also matter to criticism. In poetry, criticism meant either 'historical' or 'interpretative' or 'interpretation', which was invariable concerning what the author must have meant.

Narasimhaiah felt the *dhvani* (suggestions or resonance), *alamkara* (figures of speech, images) and *vakrokti* (obliqueness) were the most important factors to characterize poetry and the experience (*rasanubhava*) and not to show didactic ends with a quiet and disinterested observation of the facts of life. He says life is characterized by *avidya* (illiteracy) and *kama-karma* and that 'man must constantly endeavor to transcend this egocentric predicament'. He observes that the American poet, Frost, came close to this. Frost said, "Poetry is a momentary stay against confusion, thus stressing the need for constant renewal of sensibility utilizing art activity"².

² Narasimhaiah, C.D. *The Indian Critical scene: Controversial Essays*, (Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation. 1990), page no:165.

He felt art is a *Sadhana* (practice) a means to realize *paramapurushartha*, which is finally *moksha* (culmination). It was romantic ecstasy for the western writers (Shelley, Byron, and Wordsworth), but for Indians, it was 'sorrow without tears', joy without exultation, passion without any loss of serenity. The emotion that they expressed was not their own but of the masses. Here art was *dhyana mantra* and the artist had to do hard work guided by a *guru* (his art). And the perfection of art is synonymous to God, the supreme artist *viswakarma*.

Narasimhaiah's concept was that perfection in art dwelt in heaven. And there should be no question of imitation or repetition of an idea. Western art shows imitation of art activity, whereas in India the emphasis was not on *rupa* but *swarupa*. He said, "the master-painter is said to be one who can depict 'the dead without life(*chetana*). The sleeping possessed of it'. The artist had to apprehend its *svabhava* or what Gerard Manley Hopkins called 'inscape', its true nature, what makes a thing that and nothing else"³.

Now the question comes as to how an artist can present his feelings on life in terms of the society. The artist has to be equipped to deal with all the levels of people, where in Narasimhaiah's terms-of *pandit* (the scholar), *bhakta* (the devotee), *rasika* (the critic), *acharya* (the teacher) and *alpabuddahijana* (the common man). The same suffices to a critic to guide the reader or beholder.

The essence of literature is *rasa* (aesthetic pleasure). Narasimhaiah believes that *rasa* should be awakened. He feels that the minds of the responsive readers are attuned to the emotional situation as portrayed in the work of art (*hydaya samvada*), which is then absorbed (*tanmayata*) in its portrayal and that such absorption results in *rasanubhava* (experience of aesthetic pleasure). He says, "The organization of the poem should involve all significant emotions (*akhandananda*), not as in Aristotle pity and fear only, but the erotic, the comic, the frightened, the disgusting, the tender, the tranquil etc., though one of them will predominate, as the tender (*karuna*) in the *Ramayana* and the tranquil (*santa*) in the Mahabharata. The emotions may be the

³ Narasimhaiah, C.D. *The Indian Critical scene: Controversial Essays*, (Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation. 1990), page no:166.

⁴ Narasimhaiah, C.D. *The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature*, (Mysore: Central Institute of Languages, 1986,page no:51.

individual poet but he must universalize (*sadharanikarana*) them”⁴. All this depends on the poet’s (*pratibha*) imagination and (*vasana*) sensibility and (*abhyasa*) diligent cultivation of the art.

Reading various kinds of literature from across the globe, the Indian literary world started realizing that literature was not an accomplishment, but a serious matter as it mattered very much because life mattered. We became aware of the importance of metaphysical poetry, and began questioning the greatness of Milton, Eliot, learn not to be hostile to writers or the Augustan period and rejected Shelly and Sir Walter Scott. The African literature may have something to teach us like seeing an opportunity in African writing for comparison and contrast about the way England’s English language has been used by a set of people whose mother tongue is not English. It was an American, Australian, and African kind of literature, Which certainly directed the Indian writers' attention pointedly to the validity of Indian writings in English⁵.

The above doesn't stand good for British literature. Considering the cultural divergences between the British and Indians, English literature cannot affect the Indians the same way and their responses cannot be the same as that of the natives. Comparison can't function without a strong core of English and American literature to which most of the Universities are trying to add courses in European classics and Commonwealth literature. This could give rise to a unique opportunity for comparative criticism. He says that the present departments of comparative literature should be flown high and kept alive and meanwhile, the other task should be to talk ceaselessly of the importance of the comparative approach and cause serious dislocation in English syllabus and modes of teaching. Our goal should be a change of function, not the name⁶.

There have been references to the great epics like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* and that has been no full-length criticism of any of our great works of literature. The same stands good for the Indian architecture, sculpture, and paintings- the greatness of which has to be realized in terms of art and not

⁵ Narasimhaiah, C.D. *The Indian Critical scene: Controversial Essays*, (Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation. 1990), page no:163.

⁶ 6.Narasimhaiah, C.D. *The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature*, (Mysore: Central Institute of Languages, 1986), page no: 199.

otherwise. In this context, Narasimhaiah says, "How wonderful would it be if someone could attempt a close analysis of each of our great temples of Trimurthi in Elephant, of Siva as Tripurataka ready to walk out of stone, and of the coy bride Parvathi looking proudly and admiringly at Siva on winning the hand of this supreme Lord of the Universe, in *parvati panigrahanam* in one of the caves at Ellora; of Buddha preaching his First Sermon at Sarnath, or of Nataraja in Chidambaram poised in the storm-center of his creation"⁷. This would sound very depressing to any Indian scholar to see that there are lots more to be thought of to creative work.

Narasimhaiah speaks of Indian writers such as R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao who looked into life and death in depth and compared to the other Western writers. He feels that the complex experiences such as life, death, passion, love, etc should not be shut off from the students, which could make India real not only to the Europeans but also to ourselves. He blames Indians for having lost the touch with the life-giving roots of our culture.

In general, there has always been confusion about which starts first and which ends in the case of language and literature. People felt that English literature should not be taught at the school, college, or university level unless they wish to specialize in English. And the students should be taught the only language with the help of new techniques but not literature. But nobody felt it could be disastrous to the future of English teaching if language and literature were separated. This perhaps was the advice given by the British council and such other agencies and did not involve the teaching staff of the schools, colleges, and universities. But they decided to operate with their own decisions at all levels. This is not only the ideology of the traditional critics but also of the academicians.

It can also be seen that in many of the Indian universities, the syllabi were outdated and were mostly after the Oxford and London fashion, and heavily weighted down by Old English and Middle English. Narasimhaiah comments that very few Professors in Indian universities concentrated on Anglo-Saxon and Middle English and went into the grammatical subtleties and such other phenomena. But nobody did discuss

⁷ Narasimhaiah, C.D. *The Indian Critical scene: Controversial Essays*, (Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation. 1990), Page no: 262

the linguistics discipline, which is a discipline of the mind. In some other universities where the language was dealt with in detail, scholars dwelt on Shakespearean or Romantic or Victorian literary ideals.

We can see the difference between the students of arts, commerce, science background to that of Engineering and Medical students. The students of Engineering and Medical colleges are brighter than the other stream as the cream who can pass through the entrance exams get to this level. Science and engineering students write in better English even now. And to such students, an English textbook with an old syllabus, which has a composition and the normal prose and poetry does not interest them and is redundant. So, textbooks with 'some good literary content' with relevant literature are recommended to such students. Books with good prose, fiction, poetry, and drama could cultivate enough reading skills and retain their interest in English. This would improve their English and values, which is very essential in the present scenario of the predominantly scientific and technological world.

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