

Critically Reading C.N. Ramachandran's Narration and Discourse: Critical essays on Literature and Culture

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ABSTRACT

The wide ranging topics attempted by Dr C. N. Ramachandran in this collection are a proof of his in depth learning of Sanskrit, English and Kannada literary and critical traditions. Divided into two sections, the first section of this collection of essays written during a long span of time shows remarkable application of contemporary discourses and Western theories on some of the seminal texts like *Bhagwatgita*, *Ramayanas*, and *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* at one hand and a comparative study of Kannada novels and their film versions. The second section draws some new critical parameters to reevaluate Tagore, Gokak, Bendre, Narsimhaswami and other Kannada writers. Wading easily through two different currents of Eastern and Western traditions, he leaves some big lacunae while writing on some of the most fundamental texts and concepts of Indian literature and philosophy, which required deeper studies. The present article, which initially intended to be just a review of the book mentioned above, seeks to incorporate more accurate information on such issues, which the author, relying more on the false data supplied by secondary sources, dealt half-heartedly. As a corrective step to the missing 'interior signature' (as C. D. Narsimhaiya would say) of the author, the article should be read as a supplement to the book.

I

This award winning collection of essays *Akhyan-Vyakhyan* in Kannada by Dr C. N. Ramachandran, an eminent academician, translated by the author and equally talented Geetha Srinivasan, is studded with a foreword by another name of reverence Dr C. P. Ravichandran.

What gives an edge to the author in writing these remarkably perceptive essays, ranging from connected topics from *Bhagwatgita* and several *Ramayanas* and other epics, historical movement of Bhakti and Oral Kannada literature to Tagore and contemporary short story writers and poets, is his wide learning of Sanskrit, English and Kannada literary traditions. Performing the dual "role of a literary historian as well as a critic", as Ravichandran rightly praises this collection, Western theories and Indian Poetics are perfectly counterpoised by the author in the discussion of these culturally crucial essays.

The book is in two sections. The first section shows a remarkable application of Western theories and discourses at one hand and a deep understanding of Indian literary tradition on the other, be it the effort of situating and interpolating *Bhagwatgita* in various contexts, reinterpreting Valmiki's *Ramayan* or the act of categorizing and introducing various *Ramayanas*, while focusing Kannada tradition of Kuvempu and Moily. Same critical insight is visible in his intertextual analysis of *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* (however the impetus that he derives, as it seems to me, is from Romila Thapar and her ilk). What makes this section a good pack of cards is the article on the comparative models of epic in Eastern and Western traditions (a lively and very useful discussion for students as well as for teachers), a comparative study of two Kannada novels and their film versions (this

interesting article is not only informative, but it is also a good demonstration for the beginner how to write on such topics), followed by a performative discussion on the epistemological paradox in the process of translation. Ramachandran not only talks about the problems one is faced with while performing tedious task of translation, but he also suggests proper solutions screwed out of his extensive experience as a translator. This section is further enriched with the addition of two comprehensive essays, first on Bhakti movements and second on the Oral tradition of Kannada literature. The essay on the oral literature in Kannada is quite a revelation for the reader. It renders good information of the folk epics of dalit and tribal communities. Their references are followed by a neatly chalked out discussion on their poetics (form and structure), performance (signifiers, framework and communication) and the theme of resistance and protest in these narratives. What is amazing is that these essays are not sweeping accounts, but the required demand of scholarship as well as space is provided and the subtleties of the issues are dealt in detail. The first essay covers a space of 48 pages and other covers 36 pages. Both the essays provide a proper historical perspective of these topics.

Section two consists of essays on Tagore, Gokak, intertextuality in Bendre's poetry, Narsimhaswami and other Kannada writers. A very interesting and informative essay, "The Short Essay: Forms of Analysis and Interpretation", on the models of fiction criticism which also analyses a few reputed Kannada short stories, is followed by another essay, "Five Recent Short Story writers in Kannada". Both the essays give a proper survey of the evolution of modern Kannada short story.

His essay on Tagore adds some new parameters of canonizing Gurudev to the vast gamut of canonical views on Tagore. This essay highlights the parameters of Tagore's impact on Indian literature in other languages; especially the nature of his influence on style and ideology of such writers. In his essay on V. K. Gokak, the author explores the achievement of the writers of the Navodaya Period (what he later calls a Gokaka movement from 1925 to 1940) with special reference to Gokak as a touchstone. This essay which traces Gokak's influence on Indian literature, is a tribute to his stature. Ramachandran brings us to the core of Gokak's mission and vision of grand synthesis like his Guru Sri Aurobindo. This essay is followed by his remarkable understanding of Bendre's poetry. He talks about main features of his poetry. The most important one is intertextuality and yet he is different from others because of melody in his works. This melody is beautifully counter balanced by a stark social realism, which ultimately moves towards a spiritual dimensions under the influence of Sri Aurobindo. Another informative essay on a very popular poet K. S. Narasimhaswamy traces the gradual development of his long poetic career in three phases; the romantic, the modernist and the third phase. This section is completed with the contemporary scenario of Kannada fiction, ranging discussion from A. N. Krishna Rao, G. S. Shivarudrappa to the recent writers.

Ramachandran shows us how effortlessly one can move between Eastern as well as Western critical practices if s/he has proper understanding of literature. These research articles are significant academic contributions and what made this collection so special is its marvelous translations into English.

II

But I can't resist disagreeing with Prof. Ramachandran in some of the essays, where his observations seem not to be founded on primary research; they are the issues which needed deeper studies into the matter concerned. Two examples are worth examining. The essay "Gita: an Open Text" begins with an interesting discussion on *The Ochre Robe* by Swami Aghananda Bharti (Leopold Fisher). Swami's comment (negative) on Gita inspires the

author to write a brief account of commentaries on *Gita*, but Ramachandran does not evaluate the comment, which was very much desired, and leaves a lacuna in the very beginning of the essay. Swami maintains:

... my grave misgivings about this poem derive from its inane eclecticism, and from its blatant moral contradictions. It preaches violent Junkerism in one place, and extols complete withdrawal from worldly affairs in another; it propounds a half-hearted absolutism ... then it disports a naïve theological dualism with a strong sectarian flavor as its doctrinal consummation ... the *Bhagavadgita* is not a canonical text in the strict sense... Politicians and saints, philosophers and secular teachers have been editing it, rendering it into their own idiom, commenting on it, emphasizing the aspects that corroborated or condoned their particular interests. This is the main difficulty: the text lends itself to any theological slant. (132-33)

Is it justifiable to say that *Gita* is not a canonical text? About which strict sense he is talking; is it religious, theological, social or anything else? Swami Agehananda is not able to justify his arguments. It is the canonical strength of *Gita* that not only it survived the journey of thousands of years; it also survived thousands of interpretations and is still open to all, and yet no one can deny its basic principle of Karma Yoga. Swamiji does not justify how it “preaches violent Junkerism”. Is he evaluating it on a face value and wants to propose that *Gita* is basically about militarism and authoritarianism? Further what he sees as “moral contradictions”, with my little understanding I submit here, these are not contradictory but complimentary. In fact the message was to clear any kind of moral contradiction of Arjuna. The entire Indian thought, from the pre-Vedic period, depends upon this concept of the unison of opposites as they make whole; whether it is the tradition of Tantra Yoga where Shiv and Shakti complement each other or the concept of the unison of Purush and Prakriti. Centrifugal and centripetal forces are never opposites; they complement each other to run the cosmos smoothly. Agehananda perhaps missed the point that *Gita* is one step ahead and preaches to rise above the polarity of opposites. At least one example is sufficient here to explore how *Gita* transcends these dialectics. Krishna says:

त्रैगुण्यविषया वेदा निस्त्रैगुण्यो भवार्जुन ।

निर्द्वन्द्वो नित्यसत्त्वस्थो निर्योगक्षेम आत्मवान् । 2 / 45 ।।

(O Arjuna, the Vedas deal with three Gunas and their evolutes. Be free from those attributes, rise above the polarity of opposites, remain balanced, be unconcerned about the meeting of wants and preservation, of what has been already attained and get established in the self.)

Swami Ramsukhdas comments here that “the reference is to the ritualistic portions of the Vedas, which deal with the three *gunas* (attributes) and their evolutes, in the form of worldly and heavenly enjoyment. The purpose is not to censure the Vedas, but to glorify the selfless spirit”. (173) The message here is that the illumined and emancipated soul (who possesses knowledge of God) transcends the three attributes (modes) and “the pairs of opposites viz., becomes free from attachment and aversion, gets established in self and remains unconcerned about provision and preservation”. (176)

I wonder how Swami Agehananda got the notion that *Gita* is derived from “inane eclecticism”? There is no exaggeration in declaring that *Gita* is the result of the wisest eclecticism. And if there is any militarism and authoritarianism, it is to reestablish Dharma at any cost.

However Ramachandran rightly adopts a stand point that *Gita* should be viewed as a great open text, which is an obvious point in the long tradition of innumerable commentaries and explanations of *Gita* in different times and spaces. His essay briefly

introduces the structure of *Gita* and moves forward to discuss the three classical commentaries offered by three *acaryas*: Sankara, Ramanuj and Madhwacharya. These commentaries are counter balanced by three early twentieth century commentaries in colonial context by Tilak, Aurobindo and M. K. Gandhi. Whereas the philosophical interpretations by the *acaryas* are well articulated, the author is not able to receive well the modern interpretations which are deeply rooted in the socio-political contexts of colonial India in the time of freedom struggle. Apparently Tilak, Aurobindo and Gandhi try to define the concept of Karma in the context of freedom struggle and Mukti as liberation from the colonial rule. (The angle of discussion which is missed here is that *Gita* provides them not only an ideological resistance to the colonial ideology, but also helps to promote the idea of decolonizing the mind of the mimic Indian.) All of them take the text to postulate new definitions of Nationalism. Here Ramachandran does not decipher how the idea of nationalism postulated from the same source is reconstructed in different categories. While Tilak's concept of Swaraj drew its impetus from then racial ideology of awakened Chitpawan Brahmins, the limited social conservatism of which wanted a priestly control through the notion of exclusive nationalism, Gandhi through his inclusive nationalism made a greater effort of integrating the nation and his concept of Swaraj, which had a post colonial approach, aimed at freedom from the rigid caste structure as well as colonial legacy of unprecedented capitalism. The essay explores the ethical framework of Gandhi's arguments for social reform, but the exploration needed more attentive elaboration and exposition. Gandhi's views stood in sharp contrast to that of Tilak, who favoured a more militant approach.

What is disheartening and unexpected from the author of this stature is that Aurobindo's views on *Gita* are neither provided sufficient space to be explored in colonial contexts nor there is any comparison with Tilak and Gandhi. Aurobindo's commentary, which gravitates towards a complex mystic level, is multi layered with different strands of a simple socio-political interpretations as well as deep mystical Yogic interpretation and visions on human progress and spiritual evolution of man into a superman (a life divine). Aurobindo disagrees with Gandhian notion of *Ahimsa* and rejects his over emphasis on the ethical frame of the *Gita*. At the same time, unlike Tilak's reservations, Aurobindo sees the possibilities of superman in everyman. A great scholar of Sanskrit, Bengali, English, French and a proficient in various Indian and foreign languages, Sri Aurobindo was helped by his lexical proficiency to deduce a much deeper understanding and widely acceptable interpretation of *Gita*.

The problem, as it seems to me, is that the author relies more on secondary sources, which the author of his stature must avoid. His scholarship is beyond doubt but while writing on such a topic he should have relied more on his own opinion. Reliance on the secondary sources (especially on Western scholars) without proper verification of the facts is a drawback of this book. Similar problem arises when he talks about the concept of *Avatar*.

When Ramachandran talks about the concept of *Avatar* in this chapter, he commits a blunder by relying (and not rejecting) on the information rendered by Basham that the source of the concept of Avatar is Buddhist *Jatak* Tales and the belief in rebirth of Jaina. Contrary to Basham's view this concept is very much present in Vedic texts. We can trace the genesis of avatar very early in *Vedas*. Avatar is closely related with the concept of reincarnation and in *Rig-Veda* there are several hymns (I use translation of hymns of *Rig-Veda* by Ralph T.H. Griffith) where the idea of Indra taking different shapes through the power of Maya is propounded:

रूपं॑ रूपं॑ म॒घवा॑ बोभवीति॑ मा॒याः कृ॒ण्वान॑स्तन्त्वं प॒रि स्वाम् ।

त्रिर्य॑दिवः प॒रि मु॒हूर्तमा॑गात्स्वैर्मन्त्रै॑रनृ॒तुपा॑ द्धतावा॑ ॥ (2/53/8) ॥

(Maghavan weareth every shape at pleasure, effecting magic changes in his body, Holy One, drinker out of season, coming thrice, in a moment, through fit prayers, from heaven.)

And

रूपं॑ रूपं॑ प्र॒तिरूपो॑ बभूव॑ तदस्य॑ रूपं॑ प्र॒तिचक्ष॑णाय ।

इन्द्रो॑ मा॒याभिः॑ पु॒रुरूपं॑ ईयते॑ यु॒क्ता ह्यस्य॑ ह॒रयः॑ श॒ता दश॑ ॥ (6/47/18) ॥

(In every figure he hath been the model: that is his only form for us to look on. Indra moves multiform by his illusions; for his bay Steeds are yoked, ten times a hundred).

In *Rig-Veda* (1/51/13) Indra takes shape of the daughter of Vrishanaswa and in another shloka (8/17/13) Indra takes the shape of the son of Shringavrish. These are clear indications of Avatar.

According to *Shrimad Bhagwat* the first Avatar of God is 'Purush': "In the beginning the Supreme Lord assumed, for the creation of the worlds, the form of the Original Person" (1/3/1). The concept of 'Purush' is clearly laid down in "Purushsukta" in *Rig-Veda*. Here Purush is not only considered the primordial Avatar, but He is also considered the root or the point of origin as well as the end or the point of destruction. These early roots of Avatar in *Rig-Veda* are visible in special developed form in *Brahmans* (a collection of ancient Indian texts with commentaries on the hymns of the four Vedas). *Shathpath Brahman* clearly mentions *Matsyavtar* (1.8.1.1), *Kurmavatar* (7.5.1.5.14-1.2-11) and *Varahavatar* (14.1.2.11). Examples of this kind can be easily traced in *Tatriyaupnishad* also. *Varahavtar* is also mentioned in *Ramayana* (2/11). The entire story of *Ramayana* exemplifies the primordial concept of avatar, which is later testified by *Mahabharata* and especially *Gita* sets supreme example of this tradition. These scriptures provides basis for later traditions of avatar in Buddhism as well as in Jainism. Needless to point out the timings of ancient scriptures which existed much before Buddhism or Jainism. Ramachandran does not bother to explain these ideas in detail and again accepts Agehananda Bharati's explanation without any analysis that "hero-worship is a master-key to the understanding of the modern India" (23). This is a debatable point. Hero-worship had been part of every society, because every civilization emerged through this process, but this fact cannot be a litmus test for understanding societies beyond time and space. And when one talks about a nation so rich in its diversity such statements seems rudimentary.

Similar laxity of critical enquiry is again committed by the author in his chapter on Bhakti Movement when he agrees with the scholars who declare that "the concept of Bhakti is post-Vedic, and that it developed in the age of epics and puranas" (27). Though this article is an all encompassing one in its approach (except his discussion on Tulsidas which he should have done in more detail), the information which he renders about bhakti as post-Vedic needed more investigation. No doubt by the time of epic and puranas there was massive development as for as forms and practices of bhakti are concerned, but the seeds of bhakti are found in *Vedas*: the Mantras of *Vedas* contain prayer and praise. The author had a good chance to investigate and defy such scholars, but he does not explore how the roots of bhakti can be traced in *Vedas*. The purpose of bhakti is the oneness of *Jivātmā* and *Paramātmā*. Behind the recitation of mantras of Indra, Varun, Usha, Savita

etc. in *Rig-Veda*, it is the emotion of bhakti through which a deity is invoked. Recitation of mantras to bind the Brahma with the *Sadhak* is a clear indication of the belief pattern or the evocation of the emotion of bhakti which transcends reason and logic. Even one can go back to the tradition of Yoga where a *Sadhak* strives to be one with the Brahma (the ecstatic condition in which union of the individual spirit (*Jīvātmā*) with Supreme spirit (*Paramātmā*) is realized.). Needless to say that the historical evidences of the existence of Yoga were seen in the pre-Vedic period (2700 B.C.). Therefore it is not logical to dismiss that bhakti is a post-Vedic concept. *Rig-Veda* establishes the very genesis of bhakti. The mantras of invocation of gods are good examples:

अ॒श्याम॑ ते सु॒म॒तिं दे॒वय॑ज्यया॑ क्षय॒द्वीर॑स्य॒ तव॑ रु॒द्र मी॑दवः ।

सु॒म्नाय॑न्नि॒द्वि॒शो अ॒स्माक॑मा॒ च॒रा॒रि॒ष्टवी॑रा जु॒हवाम॑ ते ह॒विः ॥ (1 / 114 / 3) ॥

(By worship of the Gods-may we, O Bounteous One, O Rudra, gain thy grace, Ruler of valiant men./Come to our families, bringing them bliss; may we whose heroes are uninjured, bring thee sacred gifts).

Or

यं स्मा॑ पृ॒च्छन्ति॒ कु॒ह॒ सेति॑ घो॒रमु॑तेमा॒हुर्नै॑षो अ॒स्तीत्ये॑नम् ।

सो अ॒र्यः पु॒ष्टीर्वि॑ज॒ इ॒वा मि॑नाति॒ श्रद॑स्मै ध॒त्त स॑ ज॒नास॑ इन्द्रः ॥ (2 / 12 / 5)

(Of whom, the terrible they ask, Where is He? Or verily they say of him, He is not./He sweeps away, like birds, the foes possessions. Have faith in him, for He O men, is Indra.)

There are several examples of faith in a supreme deity and the devotion to seek blessings can be found in numerous other Vedic mantras. Not only this even the concept of bhakti Yoga or a system of devotion can be traced much before the age of epics. For example *Chandogya-Upanishad* clearly lays down the foundation of bhakti yoga in the following hymn

सर्वं॑ ख॒ल्विदं॑ ब्र॒ह्म तज्ज॑लानिति॒ शान्त॑ उपासीत । अथ॑ खलु॒ क्रतु॑मयः पुरु॒षो यथा॑क्रतु॒रस्मि॑श्लोके

पुरु॒षो भव॑ति तथेतः॒ प्रेत्य॑ भवति॒ स क्रतुं॑ कुर्वीत ॥ (3 / 14 / 1)

(All this is Brahman. Everything comes from Brahman, everything goes back to Brahman, and everything is sustained by Brahman. One should therefore quietly meditate on Brahman. Each person has a mind of his own. What a person wills in his present life, he becomes when he leaves this world. One should bear this in mind and meditate accordingly.) (Trans. Swami Lokeshwarananda)

Subsequent verses of *Chandogya-Upanishad* elaborate this concept further. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* also shows the path of bhakti yoga. The last hymn is worth quoting here

यस्य॑ दे॒वे परा॑ भक्तिः॒ यथा॑ दे॒वे तथा॑ गुरौ ।

तस्यै॑ते कथिता॒ ह्यर्थाः॑ प्रका॒शन्ते॒ महा॑त्मनः ॥ (6 / 23)

(These truths, when taught, shine forth only in that high-souled one who has supreme devotion to God, and an equal degree of devotion to the spiritual teacher. They shine forth in that high-souled one only.) (Trans. Swami Tyagisanand, 1949 133)

Despite some of these ideological ruptures in the book, Ramachandran deserves all praise for the wide range of topics, the variety of textual analysis and comparative studies of the regional literature with that of Western and Sanskrit texts and theories. One may agree or disagree with the critical premises of Ramachandran, but his instance

and insistence on translation of regional literature (Kannada) into English and juxtaposing it with various critical traditions encompassing native and Western, is the need of the hour and such critical works are most welcome.

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