Dialogue : A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation
Vol XVII, No. 1-2 June & December 2021

Decolonizing Indian Critical Practice: A Reading of CDN's *The Swan and the Eagle*

Dr. S. C. Hajela
Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Shri J.N.P.G. College, Lucknow

Publication Info

Article history :
Received : 20.08.2021
Accepted : 22.09.2021
DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v17i1-2.7

Key words:
Decolonization, Indianness, identity, tradition, culture, sensibility

Corresponding author :
sudheer.hajela@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

However,there is no doubt that critical ideas have no geographical boundaries and no criterion solely based on the ethnic identity of a literary work can be adjudged a timeless tool for evaluating literature,it cannot be denied that a work of literature itself cries for its evaluation from the view of cultural milieu it is generated in. Under the shadow of western canons, the colonized countries like India ,hardly developed a critical framework of their own to evaluate the literary works of their land, brushing aside theories from the west ,specially in the early decades of Independence. Prof CDN'S The Swan and The Eagle (1969),is one of the earliest critical works in post -independent India,where his critical analyses clearly chart out an agenda for the decolonizing Indian critical practice among students and teachers of his generation.

There is no denying the fact that Indian studies in English are historically an outcome of the British rule in India. And over the past two hundred years or so, Indian studies in English have grown and still continue to grow against the background of British imperialism and colonialism. And, despite all claims of the' Indianness', the study of English works in India has stayed firmly within the English Literature tradition. It is also quite evident that most of those who write in English as critics have been students and teachers of English. Their mindset, their literary taste and often their cultural orientations are largely western. As scholars of English, they have certain understanding of the social and intellectual history of Britain which includes the history of its imperial ventures, told from a British point of view. So it is not surprising that they have come to regard as natural or universal, the world-view implicit in the classical texts of English literature and the concerns of Euro-American literary criticism. And in their common critical practice, they have used ideas, norms and values- an ideology developed by those who were their colonial masters to study works that have emerged in India.

If we look into the critical practice of the late 1950's or early 1960's when Indian writing in English was set up as a discipline in our Indian colleges and universities, we will easily notice that the most powerful influences of this period were mainly F.R. Leavis, I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot, the New Critics- J.C. Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks etc. These critics held different critical positions but it is their belief in the autonomy of the text that defined the mainstream critical tradition of that period. It is in this critical tradition in which most of the Indian scholars of English have been trained and which they have come to regard as the only possible or perhaps even the only correct way of reading a literary text. In this kind of

critical study, the literary text is reduced to an autonomous object to be judged or evaluated primarily on the basis of its formal or verbal pattern, the social, cultural or historical origins, or connections of a work bear no importance. Need not say, given to such a critical practice, the works of Indian origin have hardly had a judicious appraisal.

Very few attempts have been made to study literary works in English in the context of Indian history and culture both classical and contemporary or from a point of view that place our socio-cultural political sensibilities and heritage to the foreground. The present article is an attempt to examine C. D. Narsimhaiah's criticisms of some literary pieces, particularly from this perspective. Significantly, his observations on an artist's native culture and tradition have paved the way for the decolonization of English studies in India.

As early as 1969, C.D.N. , in his book, *The Swan and the Eagle* ,is not for studying literature from the national standpoint in any narrow sense. Coming to judge Indian writing in English, he insists "what one has in mind is a shared tradition, a community of interests, and a set of values that people live by, all of which give a sense of identity to individuals and nation"(18).1 In his critical vision, an artist creating his own identity is closely related with creating his national identity. He comments, "The individual artist has to 'discover' as well as 'create' his own identity, he does not find it readymade. Of course in the process he discovers and creates his national identity too"(18). And it is this concept of 'creating' an identity of one's own that C.D.N. celebrates in an artist.

Critically examining the poetry of Sarojini Naidu, C.D.N. dismisses the admirations of Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse for her political maturity and intellectuality and bemoans the lack of the capability of discovering her own cultural identity. "For sentimentality, sugary sentimentality is the bane of her verse, because it had not been informed and supported by the strength of cerebration. It is the failure to discover and probe the identities we spoke of earlier that condemned Mrs. Sarojini Naidu to an inferior status or poet"(19-20). But C.D.N. finds some of her poems like, "Song of Radha, the Milkmaid" and "Leili" as 'very good' and the reason is worth noticing, it is, "Where she succeeded in keeping her emotion faithful to the folk songs of South India"(21). For C.D.N., it is the question of an artist's sincerity to his native tradition that matters most. The point becomes clearer when we examine his brief analysis of Sarojini Naidu's well known poem, "Indian Weavers". C.D.N. quotes the full poem and comments, "Here, in twelve lines, is an elliptical, elusive and symbolic presentation of life journey from birth to death"(22). The use of terms like 'elliptical, 'allusive', and 'symbolic' surely reminds us of the terminology of New Critics but what follows is a typical Indian approach to a work of literary art- only a critic steeped in his own culture can appreciate this profound awareness of Indian tradition in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu! One cannot resist the temptation to quote C.D.N.'s remarks on the poem in full:

> Now, who are weavers? Do they correspond to the three Fates or Sisters of Greek Mythology? Perhaps, yes. But the Hindu trinity is quite firmly impressed on Sarojini's mind and the poet gives convincing proof of the intimate knowledge of her own tradition with surprising economy and sharpness of touch: the weavers are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, each taking a stanza unto himself. Brahma, the patron deity of birth associated in myth and legend with the lotus which blossoms at break of day in the blue pond under the blue sky, is clearly implicit in the poet's choice of time of the day, the colour and the context. The second stanza is about Vishnu, the foster father, traditionally associated with colour, gaiety and possibly even vain display- all symbolized in the plumes of the peacock, purple and green. And at the journey's end when all the joys of his life are said and sung, and when the school of life has administered sufficient knocks and jolts, what

> remain? 'Solemn and still in the moonlight chill' is Shiva, smeared with ashes and sitting in meditation, on the snowy heights of Himalayas. Breaking through 'the fury and the mire of human veins one settles to a perception of the truth of life; that he is no destroyer like the third sister of the Greek Trinity who cuts the thread of life, for he transforms man from death to life; and death life, the 'dome of many coloured glass' breaks and is restored to the 'white radiance of eternity' astonishing that none of her characteristic views of her rhetoric sentimentality and vague longings, and the poetical diction which usually mar her verse should be present here to vitiate the poem. It is not merely a competent poem but a distinguished one for Sarojini because the poet here is in full possession of the rare gifts- a profound awareness of her own tradition, admirable poise, economy, and an ear and eye for striking rhythm, image and symbol all used to fine advantage to make the poem more evocative (22-23).

One can hardly disagree that C.D.N. praises this particular poem of Sarojini for her poise, economy, soothing rhythm, image and symbol, used to make the poem most evocative but what is most significant is that she is here *in full possession of a profound awareness of her own tradition*.

For decolonization (freedom) of one's mind, one's return to one's roots in culture and tradition is a must. C.D.N. believes that a poet or artist must turn to his or her own cultural and traditional roots in the choice of themes and should return to the readers his or her individual sensibility. His criticism of Toru Dutt's poetry is a sufficient example of it. He admonishes Sarojini for looking into English Romantics and asks her to learn better from her predecessor Toru Dutt. He is all praise for Toru Dutt, "A Hindu convert of Christianity, she nevertheless made it a means of enriching her own cultural inheritance" (23). He finds the praises of Edmund Gosse and French scholar Darmesteter, well deserved and accounts for his own liking for her collection of poems- *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* in terms which speak volumes about what he expects from a poet:

> It shows at once her knowledge of Sanskrit and the tradition it nourished, not to speak of the folk culture which had also received its nourishment from Sanskrit. The choices of themes- Savitri, Dhruva, Prahlad, Buttoo, Lakshman (each a household name in Hindu India), the time honored Indian way of story-telling in verse which must keep the story going and the listener engrossed in it; the admirable economy of word and phrase, the evocative power of Sanskrit, the precision of French and the concreteness of English are potentially present. So well told are the great tales of India that I should have no hesitation to prefer them to anything of their kind in English by anyone else and I should like them read by children of all lands including our own (25).

It becomes quite evident from the passage quoted just above that C.D.N. likes her poetry because she could make the best use of her (i) knowledge of Sanskrit,(ii) folk culture, (iii)Indian themes, (iv) story telling in verse and (v) the economy of word and phrase, to "*enrich her own cultural inheritance*." C.D.N. praises the consummate opening and the smooth flow of her poem 'Savitri' and her admirable insight into the mysterious character Narad, the ease and the perfect command of the dramatic form and her uncanny choice of words to express the controlling metaphysical view of life on earth as 'Maya'. Further, commenting on the first four line of the " Jogadhya Uma" where there is a fire fusion of word, syntax and rhythm in the bangle seller's secret cry, C.D.N. comments, "The sensibility is exclusively Indian, of the folk, that is to say, the concretization is an admirably adequate English"2 and ultimately admiring Toru for the images in "Our Casuarina Tree" and the sonnet "Lotus" , C.D.N. upholds, " for an Indian girl in her teens to demonstrate in English such acquaintance with Greek Mythology, Christian and Hindu symbolism, a rare feeling for words coupled with a reliance on speech

rhythms, an enviable control of the sonnet form and above all, to vindicate with such seemingly playfulness the strength of her own tradition"(29). Needless to say that besides other literary merits, a *writer's rootedness in his own tradition* is a powerful literary criterion in C.D.N.'s assessment of an artist's greatness.

Discussing Sir Aurobindo as a poet, C.D.N asserts, "I don't know any poet of our time unless it be T.S. Eliot who knew so many languages and literatures, ancient and modern in addition to history, philosophy, theology, science and the arts"(29). And reminds the readers, "If poetry is a mode of meditation 'dhyan mantra', you find it here, but a traditionally different sensibility from the one so far embodied in the English language had to be expressed in it"(29). And also, "Like Conrad who broadened the descriptive range of the English language, it may be said of Sri Aurobindo that he made the English language accommodate certain hitherto (inconscient) areas of experience both through his prose work 'Life Divine' and through his epic 'Savitri'"(30).

Analyzing Sri Aurobindo's epic 'Savitri' C.D.N. makes it clear how going back to the Vedas, Aurobindo gave the legend a mystic significance and made it serve as a symbol of conquest of darkness by light, of ignorance by knowledge. He conceded that Savitri is a magnificent conception and a colossal undertaking and praises its poise, simplicity and the cumulative effect of its words and images and finally declares, "If *Paradise Lost* is a great epic, I should be prepared to put aside my personal predilections and feel bold to declare 'Savitri' a great epic indeed, perhaps the greatest in Indian language, an opinion shared by some of the better English and American critics"(34). He conceded that if Aurobindo's 'Savitri' fails to appeal to the sophisticated English readers, it is because,, "Sri Aurobindo being cut off from modern movements in English poetry has not altogether discarded the idioms of an early age and to this, add the handicap of his operating in the labyrinthine mazes of mysticism to which a majority of readers have no access"(34). C.D.N. also considers some poems of Aurobindo's 'Last Poems' and praises his experiments with vocabulary, syntax and form. To him, Aurobindo is a sage-poet, "*rooted in the ancient wisdom of a life affirming tradition*" (35).

Passing from Sri Aurobindo to the poets of the 1960's, is for C.D.N. to pass from tradition to experimentation, "The stimulus for which has come wholly from abroad.", he comments. He finds young poet Dom Moraes's first effort 'A Beginning' which won the Hawthornden prize, and his second volume of verse entitled 'Poems' (1960) in the romantic tradition. And analyzing one of his poems, 'The Garden', C.D.N. observes, "It is not sophisticated idiom alone but also a changed sensibility that controls the organization of the poem" (36). C.D.N. here again raises the question of an artist's 'creating' an identity when he observes that even after the publication of Dom Moraes's second collection of poems, " one is not sure that one can identify an unknown poem of Dom Moraes by any characteristic theme or craftsmanship of which he is now a master"(38).

Applying the same critical standards against Nissim Ezekiel's poetry, C.D.N. considers him a serious poet, a distinct voice in poetry, but comments, "One is not sure that the poet shows any *profound awareness of the entire Indian tradition* from the Vedas and the Upanishads to the present day in all its complexity"(38). He agrees that the base on which he stands is Indian but in a limited sense. He finds he has imbibed the best element of poetry of Yeats, Eliot and other English poets of the thirties. C.D.N. finally observes that "No one can pretend that this poet has inherited the greet past of India in a significant way, which is to say that he does not command all the resources available to him, but to the extent he has availed

himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs he must be said to be an important poet not merely in the Indian context, but in a consideration of those that are writing poetry anywhere in English" (40).

One sees, C.D.N. examines, besides other features- the extent to which literary artists in india have been successful in 'creating' their cultural identity. 'Does a particular poet or artist show any profound awareness of his own native tradition, culture and society?' has been a recurrent question in his criticism that is an enquiry of indian culture and sensibilities, can be so correlated to the study of English in general. This critical practice has been a guide and beacon light to all students and teachers in India to study English literature from a fresh decolonized approach. It can greatly help Indian academia to be free from the colonial biases and prejudices and evolve an Indian critical framework to judge the works of Indian and western writers in English.

Work Cited

Narsimhaiah, C.D. *The Swan and the Eagle.* Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1969, p18. (all further references are from the same book).