

**“Turn Inward. Scrape The Bottom Of Your Past”:**

## **R. Parthasarathy and The Language Of Post Independence Indian English Poetry**

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**Abstract:** *As a primary identity marker, language is a seminal issue in the critical analysis and appreciation of poetry. In the case of Indian English poetry; this has been a site of debate and conflict with a complex history of negotiations and experimentation. A poet like R. Parthasarathy, with his dual linguistic inheritance of Tamil and English and his poetic expression of the dialogue between these two languages in the crafting of a milestone in modern poetry, gives us a very interesting insight into how post Independence Indian English poets negotiated the minefield of criticism to write in their own unique voices. R. Parthasarathy is one of the most prominent voices among post Independence Indian English poets who talk about the dilemmas of a bilingual poet at great length. There are basically three dimensions to his articulation of these conflicts and his search for a resolution. The first of these is the image of English as a colonial legacy and its impact on the creativity of the poet. He also discusses the adequacy of English to speak for him and his cultural self. The next dimension he discusses is his return to Tamil, first in its contemporary form and then its ancient form as found in the classics of the language. Finally, he attempts a dialogue between his English and his Tamil self to overcome schizophrenic agonies and craft a new poetics.*

**Keywords:** *R. Parthasarathy, Indian English Poetry, Tamil. Identity, Language.*

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As a primary identity marker, language is a seminal issue in the critical analysis and appreciation of poetry. In the case of Indian English poetry; this has been a site of debate and conflict with a complex history of negotiations and experimentation. A poet like R. Parthasarathy, with his dual linguistic inheritance of Tamil and English and his poetic expression of the dialogue between these two languages in the crafting of a milestone in modern poetry, gives us a very interesting insight into how post Independence Indian English poets negotiated the minefield of criticism to write in their own unique voices.

In his seminal introduction to *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, Parthasarathy explores this issue in detail and writes, “An important characteristic of Indian verse in English in the mid-twentieth century has been its emergence from the mainstream of English literature and its appearance as a part of Indian literature. It has been said that it is Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian environment, and reflects its mores, often ironically.” [1] He goes on to add that he sees the ‘quality of the experience’ expressed by the poets in English as one of the problems that beset this writing. A problem is the ‘idiom’ used by these poets. In this regard he feels that most of the poets have not been able to find “an adequate and above all, a personal language” and “they have not been able to extend the resources of the Indian language or even Indianize it.” [2] The other poet who has spoken at length about the use of English by Indian writers is A.K. Ramanujan. He says, “We’re split linguistically in so many ways. In our house for instance, we spoke Kannada outside and Tamil downstairs. Indoors/outdoors, child/adult, library/bedroom cut through us, don’t they?” For himself, the poet feels that the only solution seems to be “to be oneself in the language one uses...to find a voice which is one’s own, however cracked or small, sick or normal, which follow one’s twists and turns, falls and rises and stumbles, in one’s ‘climb to one’s proper dark’ – though the climb may be like a monkey’s on a greased pole, two feet up and three feet down.” [3]

The central issue, which this paper will explore, has little or nothing to do with whether the poets should or should not write in English. It can now be taken as said that the language has chosen the poets and there is no value attached to the medium per se, but the value comes from the efficacy of its use in the crafting of the verse and the expression of experience and emotion, in an acquired language. This paper endeavours to

look at the conflicts expressed by an Indian English poet in his efforts to craft a new poetics. One of the kinds of conflicts is that expressed by M. Sivaramakrishna who says it is ‘the intellectual allegiance to an alien language and the emotional apprehension of its futility.’ [4] Another important issue at hand is the contribution of Indian poets to the English language and the extent to which they have been successful in not only indigenising it, but also extending its boundaries in terms of style and content, to say what it has never been used for before and in a manner which combines the traditions of English and native Indian languages.

R. Parthasarathy is one of the most prominent voices among post Independence Indian English poets who talks about the dilemmas of a bilingual poet at great length. There are basically three dimensions to his articulation of these conflicts and his search for a resolution. The first of these is the image of English as a colonial legacy and its impact on the creativity of the poet. He also discusses the adequacy of English to speak for him and his cultural self. The next dimension he discusses is his return to Tamil, first in its contemporary form and then its ancient form as found in the classics of the language. Finally, he attempts a dialogue between his English and his Tamil self to overcome schizophrenic agonies and craft a new poetics. Parthasarathy in the essay “Whoring After English Gods” [5] says, “English forms a part of my intellectual, rational, make-up, and Tamil, of my emotional, psychic make-up. Fortunately the psyche has not been damaged beyond repair, and it is still possible to keep in touch with it. It is from here that really all poems begin...the situation itself is poetry.” While the poems in his only published collection *Rough Passage* (1977) [6], are all in English, in his second (forthcoming) collection, *A House Divided* [7] he includes a number of translations from Tamil and Urdu. There are three poems in *Rough Passage* in which Parthasarathy speaks about his attitude to English, which he has been using, for creative expression. As will be evident in the second collection, what he later gives up is not English, but its associations with an alien world-view. It is only when he uses English to express an Indian sensibility does it become his own. This is a debt he owes, as he himself acknowledges, to Raja Rao and A.K. Ramanujan. As M. Sivaramakrishna points out, Parthasarathy’s poem that talks of the unchaining of the Indian tongue from English ‘can be regarded as a paradigm for the entire Indo-English poetic milieu today’ [8]. S. Mishra adds his comment to this and says that this writer’s quest can be seen as the ‘archetypal quest: the honest wish on the part of the post-colonial artist, to organise experience within the dialectic furnished by the acquired language, and which ironically was the original cause of his exile’.[9]

When Parthasarathy begins his poetic journey he has already realized that the “English gods” he had spent his youth “whoring after” will no longer serve his poetic purposes and he has to begin his search anew for an authentic language of his own. The first metaphor used to describe this language is a botanical one, asserting the importance of roots and a suitable soil for the growth of a healthy plant. In the second poem of “Exile” (*Rough Passage*, Page 17) [10] the poet writes about the mutation of the power of expression into an inarticulate and lifeless thing when it is transplanted and says

“There is something to be said for exile:

you learn roots are deep.  
That language is a tree, loses colour  
under another sky.

The bark disappears with the snow,  
and branches become hoarse.”

This metaphor reappears in “Grandfather’s Porch In Summer” (*A House Divided*, Page 104) and he writes of how he has to continue to keep faith with his ability to write authentic and sincere poetry, despite all evidence that tries to prove the contrary and he says

“Most of the time you dined  
on the simple fare

of homespun Tamil hymns –  
mouth-watering sugarcane  
you never tired of.

Now your tongue is withered  
to the root. Only the pen keeps faith  
and refuses to give up.”

S. Chindhade asserts that the image of the tree for language helps to clinch one of the centrally important concerns in the poem, namely “the possibility and need of striking roots and establishing an independently distinct identity through the right choices of the language as an expressive/creative medium.

...Language being the main barrier that hinders one from being one with an alien culture, the right and only alternative seems to be the acceptance of one’s language and tradition and rejection of a temporarily seductive but ultimately frustrating medium and alien culture.” [11] L. Raghunandan also comments on this metaphor and says, “The roots in relation to the tree signify something more than the ability of language to grow and survive in an alien soil. If language is a tree projecting externally an inwardly felt experience, the roots of the tree sinking deep into the soil is the mind’s quest deep within the self for the experience that seeks verbalization.” [12]

Before going on to resolve his linguistic and poetic conflicts, the poet recalls the time when he learnt English in school and the way he felt even then that there was something the language was not able to give him. In the second poem of “Trial” (*Rough Passage*, Page 32) [13] he writes

“School was a pretty kettle of fish:  
the spoonfuls of English  
brew never quite slaked your thirst.

Hand on chin, you grew up,  
all agog, on the cook’s succulent  
folklore.”

When the poet returns to India after an absence during which he has realized that he cannot make his home in England, the language he hears in the cities “is a noise” and he thinks in the poem “Exile 7” (*Rough Passage*, Page 24) [14]

“The sun has done its worst:  
skimmed a language,  
worn it to a shadow.”

While the poet is negotiating this rough passage in search of a suitable language, he writes a number of poems about poetry and the power within words to give a voice to the inner soul of the poet. In the eleventh poem of “Trial” (*Rough Passage*, Page 41) he calls words, the “ripples in the deep well of the throat”. By the fourteenth poem of “Homecoming” (*Rough Passage*, Page 63) [15] which is also the final poem in the book, the poet is in a state of despair and he writes

“I fear I have bungled again.  
That last refinement of speech  
terrifies me. The balloon

of poetry has grown red in the face  
with repeated blowing. (...)

Hereafter, I should be content,  
I think, to go through life  
with the small change of uncertainties.”

This despair perhaps has its genesis in an earlier poem in which Parthasarathy spells out his poetic credo through a series of negatives and roundly condemns and castigates the poets who he does not want to have any truck with. In the twelfth poem of “Homecoming” (*Rough Passage*, Pages 60-61) [16] he writes

“I see him now sitting at his desk (...)

He went for the wrong gods from the start.  
And marriage made it worse.  
He hadn’t read his Greek poets well:  
Better to bury a woman than to marry her.  
Now he teaches. Reviews verse  
written by others. Is invited to conferences

and attends them. How long it had taken  
him to learn he had no talent  
at all, although words came easy.

One can be articulate about nothing (...)

From his fingertips ooze ink and paper,

as he squats on the dungheap  
of old texts and obscure commentaries. (...)

Where would His Eminence be  
but for the poets who splashed about  
in the Hellespont or burned in the Java Sea?”

For the poet at this stage in the formulation of his poetic credo there is a clear confrontation between English and Tamil, and he resolves to give up the former and return to his linguistic roots to strengthen the tree of his language. However as is evident from his second collection he goes back on this resolve, at least insofar as his choice of medium of creative expression is concerned.

In form and content, Parthasarathy, according to L. Raghunandan, is “the only Indo-English poet to have keenly expressed the tension of a bicultural bilingual psyche in effective communication of an experience.” [17]

In the first poem of “Homecoming”, (*Rough Passage*, Page 49) [18] he writes of this return journey in two stages. The first step is to move from English to Tamil and he writes

“My tongue in English chains  
I return, after a generation, to you.  
I am at the end

of my dravadic tether,  
hunger for you unassuaged”.

The next step is to clarify that the Tamil he is going back to is the language of the classical texts of ancient times and not the language as it heard on the streets and seen in the cinema and he says

“I falter, stumble

Speak a tired language  
wrenched from its sleep in the *Kural*,  
teeth, palate, lips still new

to its agglutinative touch.  
Now, hooked on celluloid, you reel  
down plush corridors.”

The Tamil that he encounters on his return has degenerated into an effete language through centuries of complacency and cultural degeneration. The metaphor depicting the degeneration and desiccation of the culture and the language is the river Vaikai [19]. S. Chindhade compares this depiction to A.K.Ramanujan’s “A River” which speaks of a similar sense of loss. He says, “Ramanujan offers an oblique, but sharp comment on the jejuneness and poverty of Tamil literature which has failed to come to grips with bare realities and living experiences of human life. The loss through smug insensitivity is incalculable in both poems. Emperors and poets personifying heroic tradition and aesthetic culture have left the Vaikai in Parthasarathy’s poem while in Ramanujan’s poem the poets sang only of cities and temples, totally ignoring the recurring tragedy caused by the floods every year.” [20]

Parthasarathy’s declared aim has been to sustain a dialogue between himself and his Tamil past. [21] He seeks to emulate the example of Ramanujan in this endeavour, since he believes that the latter was able to achieve reclamation, retrieval and a re-forging of the self by reversing and displacing the process of colonisation by “acclimatizing the English language to an indigenous tradition.” The past had relieved Ramanujan of his burdens, for Parthasarathy the past is a burden.

The Tamil that Parthasarathy hears on the streets of Madras is not what he had come in search of and in the second poem of “Homecoming” (*Rough Passage*, Page 50) [22] he expresses his disappointment at what has happened to this ancient and powerful language. He writes

“To live in Tamil Nadu is to be conscious  
every day of impotence.  
There is the language, for instance:

the bull, Nammalvar took by the horns,  
is today an unrecognizable carcass,

quick with the fleas of Kodambakkam.”

Along with the realization that the present form of Tamil will not suit his poetic purposes, the poet reaffirms his decision to retrieve his cultural roots by returning to them in his verse and he continues the poem by saying

“How long can foreign poets

provide the staple of your lines?  
Turn inward. Scrape the bottom of your past.  
Ransack the cupboard

For skeletons of your Brahmin childhood (...)

You may then,  
Perhaps, strike out a line for yourself  
from the iron of life’s ordinariness.”

When this momentous decision has been taken, he is now ready to forsake English and “read Kamban and Ilango” and “rub his breath” with theirs [23]. While he does not forsake English, the route by which he returns to his roots is via Tamil and in this he is following the example of the great Tamil poet Subramania Bharati in whose praise he writes in the poem “*Bharati At One Hundred*” (*A House Divided*, Page 34)

“He loaded every rift

of the English he used  
with the ore of his distant Tamil,  
a language he spoke only occasionally.

His fastidious tongue, however,  
prowled nightly among the old  
cuvatis of palm-leaf verses”.

This is the kind of synergy that Parthasarathy aspires to in his own verse. Even his translation of the Tamil classic, ‘The Tale of an Anklet’, can be seen in fact as an exercise in cultural retrieval as he establishes a bond with his past. This is a dialogue initiated by him to delve deep into the slumbering glory of his language. The other poets whom he initiates a dialogue with are Ghalib [24] and Zauq [25] in recognition of the refinement and beauty of the Urdu they wrote in, and also in recognition of the power with which they described Delhi in their poems.

In the other poems where Parthasarathy talks about ‘Language’, he appears to be moving towards an economy that will culminate in a silence that is more powerful than words can ever be. He had stated that “A poem ought to, in effect, try to arrest the flow of language, to anaesthetize it, to petrify it, to fossilize it.” [26] S. Mishra sees in the poetry of Parthasarathy a movement towards.

“the negative silence of vacancy as the poet unsuccessfully tries to embody in a foreign language the sensory experiences of his Tamil self. Each attempt ends in failure because the encoding medium, the English language is not attuned to the “otherness” of those empirical signs emanating from the native sensibility. The acquired language is considered opaque to what is inherent in the poet’s cultural self and is used only to communicate an intellectual struggle, which, though affording him insights into his personal dilemmas, fails nonetheless to translate the experiential signifiers of the indigenous person.” [27]

In “Tamil – 7” (*A House Divided*, Page 37) Parthasarathy writes in this context that

“A poem begins where prose ends-  
at the edge of the word.  
Every word that you speak  
is composed of breath.  
On this most intangible foundation  
rests the way of poetry.”

He goes on to assert in “*Prayers-I*” (*A House Divided*, Page 106) how it is now time for him to

“wring the handkerchief of words dry  
dripped in the perfume of silence.”

His final word on this question of poetic aphasia is in “Prayers – 2” the final poem of *A House Divided* (Pages 107-108) in which he says

“Short of wringing its neck,  
I try every trick of phrase  
to cosmetize the blank page:

it refuses to improve.  
Now I prefer to brazen speech,  
knock the metaphor out of it. (...)

I soften to the touch.  
You keep house,  
from afar shape the poems

till they become familiar as prayers.  
To be oneself,  
strike no postures,

on rare occasions  
stumble upon the blessings of simplicity –  
I couldn’t ask for more.”

This Janus-faced poem is firmly located on the threshold of the future and the poet has found his voice at last with the “small change of uncertainties” [28] finally having become the sum of poetic salvation.

M. Sivaramakrishna links the themes in Parthasarathy’s *Rough Passage* to claim for it a paradigmatic status on the theme of conflicts and dilemmas faced by Indian English poets. He says:

“The poem ... pinpoints three crucial features: first, there is the transcendence by the poet of the Anglo mania of his predecessors which ensures the necessary aesthetic detachment to contemplate his predicament; second, this predicament is rooted in the fact that the return of the exile does not necessarily imply a renewal of the self unless the poet rediscovers a ‘usable past’. Third, this rediscovery is linked inextricably with the problem seminal for the creative writer: that of language. By implication, the poet’s intellectual alienation precludes the possibility of choosing his own language (thereby assisting the periodic cleansing of the language of the tribe), he has the corresponding problem, as an Indo-English poet, of naturalizing English in consonance with the Indian sensibility and milieu so that the least trace of derivativeness is removed. ... If the Indo-English poet of the nineteenth century has had his tongue firmly entrenched in English chains, it is the unchaining of this that is suggested by Parthasarathy’s poem.” [29]

It would be apposite to give the final word on the question of language and its relationship to poetry to the poet himself. This is the outcome of an interview that the author had the privilege of conducting with the poet. [30]

When asked about the importance of language in the identity formation of Indian English poets, R. Parthasarathy says:

Each of the poets comes with a particular linguistic baggage and that informs the kind of writing they do. In my own case for example, Tamil informs my writing to a great extent. “*Cousin Sundari*” is a Tamil poem in English. What you do, is make the two languages speak to one another and you write in English, but essentially the discourse is Tamil. Every poet has this baggage – whether he writes in that language or not, but he has access to both. And English is something you have picked up along the way – it is not the language in which you started speaking. So your mother tongue is a language of your own, it’s always at the back of your mind. It is the language of your family, your early childhood and English comes later, as your father tongue. Persian and Sanskrit were father tongues and all of the great poets who wrote in Sanskrit must have had a mother tongue. And that is the most exciting thing happening about Indian Literature in English. If you go back to Raja Rao’s significant preface to ‘Kanthapura’ – we cannot write like the English, but at the same time we have to be inventive – the idiom, the tone, are bound to be different. This is not British or American English we

are writing, there is an Indian variety of English.

The conversation inevitably led to the debate about authenticity and when asked about expressing the nuances of his native milieu in a language that does not have its roots in it, Parthasarathy said:

Tamil and English inform my writing, even though the poems are in English. *A House Divided* continues the same form of the triplet I used in *Rough Passage*. As you know the unit of composition in both Tamil and Sanskrit was the “muktaka” – an isolated stanza of two to four lines. I have translated a number of these and they freeze the experience at the crucial moment so you have an entire human experience almost condensed in the form of an epigram. This is what you have in *A House Divided* as opposed to *Rough Passage* which is just the bare bones. The former is even more concentrated in terms of expression as compared to the poems in *Rough Passage*. There’s a greater clarity, a greater precision in the use of language – especially if you keep in mind the idea of ‘word as mantra’. In the oral tradition of course, the spoken word had greater validity than the written word. As I have said elsewhere, the written word is a dead letter and it has to be informed by the breath of the speaker. Our learning has traditionally been transmitted orally – from the mouth of the teacher to the student. Putting down words on paper is just one way of preserving them. *A House Divided* has a very strong oral thrust and it culminates in a sequence of poems called “*Srirangam*”, which is a place of pilgrimage.

R. Parthasarathy has undertaken the journey to set up a home with the language of his poetic expression, changing it and being changed by it. His voice is unique insofar as it partakes of a number of linguistic resources and while the language used is English, it is an English that has been co-opted to the expression of a native sensibility. Parthasarathy has successfully expanded the horizons of English to encompass a spectrum of experiences that transcend borders and boundaries. It is by re-routing his poetic journey to English via his linguistic roots that he has written such magnificent poetry, which in its many hued textures reflects the richness of the literary traditions of a multilingual country like India.

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- [11] **Chindhade, S.** *Five Indian English Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre and R. Parthasarathy*. Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001. Pages 130-133.
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- [13] This poem reappears as “The Family Album I” in *A House Divided*, Page 69.
- [14] “Exile 5”, *Rough Passage*, Page 22.
- [15] This poem reappears as “That Last Refinement Of Speech” in *A House Divided*, Page 86. A change in its latter form is that the first person of the original poem has been changed to the third person when the poem is placed in the second collection, perhaps indicating that the dilemmas of the poem are no longer of any consequence for this poet.

- [16] In “Trial 12” (*Rough Passage*, 42) Parthasarathy mentions Tu Fu and Sappho as inspirations at one time.
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