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The Discourse of Meaning, Truth and Reality: Postmodern interpretation of Two Texts

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Abstract

The true nature of meaning, reality and truth as represented in a literary text is a debatable topic. Paradigm shifts have taken place in the way in which a literary text is analyzed. From textual criticism to cultural studies, the parameters of criticisms have changed. If literature occupied a privileged position in New Criticism, the same is rejected in social and cultural theories. Now the notion that literature and literary text is a part of social/ cultural discourse has gained momentum. Entering into the foray of cultural studies gives us an opportunity to look at a text from multi disciplinary point of view. It must always be understood that knowledge cannot be compartmentalized and hence multi disciplinary approach is only a natural *means* of analyzing a text-in-question. Many times it is misunderstood that one can mechanically apply critical theories to literary texts so that our pre suppositions are proved. Creative writing defies such formulaic and easy application of theories. Roughly, there are two kinds literary narratives. One is – the writers want to prove their thesis in a text. The other is that the Writers articulate and explore possibilities of meaning rather than fixing it as a formula in a text. In this category, any formulaic reading acts as a limiting framework. So it is better to take into considerations of liquidity of meaning and transitory nature of reality in a text.

With this back ground, let me analyze two important and interesting Kannada poems. They are H S Shivaprakash's poem *Simhavalokana,* and Chandrashekara Kambara' poem *That Tree, This Tre*e. These poems deny simplistic formula criticism and are extremely open ended.

Key Words: Meaning, Reality, Representation, Narratives, Paradigm Shift

It is a known fact that both post structuralists and post modernists deny universal meaning of reality and truth. They even doubt the ability of language to express and contain truth and reality. Do reality and truth construct language or is it the language which constructs them is a complicated question. Our popular belief is that it is through language, reality is *'explained'*. To put the same in another way, language becomes a *medium* for narrating and containing truth/reality. This popular belief pre supposes two things. One is that language is powerful enough to record complex human experiences and therefore it is omnipotent. The second is that there is a concrete category called truth/reality. Post modern philosophy does not accept both. It questions the ability of language to explain, contain any experience. It treats meaning, reality, and truth as unstable, subjective and liquid. The linguist Ferdinand Saussure argued about arbitrariness of meaning but he believed that signifier and signified have definite structural coherence. Post structuralists have argued about endless

deferment of meaning. They argue that there is no uncontaminated signifier. Derrida argued that "the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domine and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*" (1981)

Post modernists argue that all the above stated categories are artificial *constructs* and they depend upon the *view point* of the onlooker. As the perspective changes, reality changes; as the person change, once again reality changes as well. Therefore the categories called reality and truth are much more complex than what we think. In other words, they are not *priory givens*. They do not exist by themselves absolutely and their existence can be seen only in relationship with the "other". Even before the usage of such terms, many Kannada writers have narrated these experiences. They do not treat meaning, reality and truth as a homogeneous singular category. One such narrative is H S Shivaprakash's poem *Simhavalokana*. (roughly translated as Lionspection or introspection)

Context: This poem was written in mid 1980es and published in the anthology *Anukshana Charitha* (1990). Kannada literary criticism largely neglected a poem like this, which had a different subject matter. During that time, his poem *Samagara Bhimavva* was more celebrated and discussed. In summary, H S Shivaprakash' poems are constituted by little narratives and their sources are drawn from various little philosophical traditions. His poems have a strong sense of memory, desire and reflexivity. He uses several cross references, allusions in his poems so that a different collage form is achieved.

The title *Simhavalokana* has two different connotations. One is looking back or re examine. The other is Look like a lion or introspect. Both interpretations are valid and the whole poem introspects the fundamental aspects of language, reality, meaning and so on.

For familiarity, let me summarize the poem in simple terms. The poem opens with a Lion looking into a mirror and claiming that the mirror looks like a Lion. A Rabbit also looks into a mirror and thinks that the mirror is like a Rabbit. A Cat and a rat also look into the mirror and say that the mirror is their own forms. A serious debate takes place between these four animals and there was disagreement as to what exactly is meant by a mirror. So all of them looked into the mirror simultaneously and still thought that the mirror was like their own image. Here the narrator states that "the mirror was like everybody and it was like nobody". The quarrel continued with no definite resolution. In a fit of fury, the cat ate the rat and the Lion ate the rabbit. Further, the Lion ate the cat too! The last war was between the Lion and the mirror itself. The Lion broke the glass into number of pieces. But when it looked into the mirror now it saw multiple images of itself!! It was so angry and frustrated that it started attacking glass pieces, sleeping over the glass and died. This is roughly a simple summery of the poem.

Now let us look into the complexity of issues raised in this poem. Though this poem looks simple and adopts the form of a *parable,* its meaning is highly debatable. The text foregrounds fundamental philosophical questions about language,

reality, truth and meaning. In the first stanza it is clearly stated that all four animals thought that the mirror was like them. For them, the image in the mirror was a reality and not the other way round. But the text tells us that there are at least four different realities. Every individual animal never thought about the possibility of multiple realities. For them, singular, subjective image of themselves was a reality. They could not see reality beyond themselves. When other animals disputed other versions of reality, trouble started. This singular and rigid version of reality led to violence and bloodshed. The poem is not only philosophical but also contemporary in its tone and tenor. Our narrow and rigid interpretation of linguistic, cultural and religious identities leads to a great violence and destruction. The narrative also shows that truth and reality cannot be owned or there cannot be universal meaning of reality/truth. In the text itself there are multiple possibilities of realities and all these are not final as well. The poem fundamentally asks the question what constitutes reality and how it can be perceived. The animals could perceive it only through their subjective eyes.

It is interesting to note that the poem asks another important question. All animals thought that the mirror was like *them*. They could not see mirror *as mirror* only. The very existence of mirror is seen in relationship with something else. In the narration, the mirror has no autonomous existence. Its very essence as *object* is not seen by the animals. They could see only themselves and not mirror as mirror. For the lion, mirror was like a lion. For a cat, the

mirror was like a cat. Again the animals could see themselves partially in the mirror only. They could only look at their form through the *medium* called mirror. However the very existence of the medium is missed by the animals. The relationship between real and unreal or bimba and pratibimba is completely blurred here. The narrative also raises a question like is the mirror just a mirror? Or is it a medium to show reality? What is real? Is it the image of the lion or Lion itself? From whose perception reality is constructed? and so on.

The ending of the poem is open ended and complicated. The Lion through its sheer physical strength has killed every other animal that have a different take on reality. It was successful in *silencing* other versions of reality but it cannot win even at the end. When it broke one mirror, it became many and the Lion cold see many lions now. Earlier one Lion looked in one mirror. But now the same Lion can see many lions. Thus, the earlier version of its own reality is negated and rejected. Reality now becomes fractured and multiple. Or, this fractured and partial reality was already there in the beginning itself which the lion could not see. Walter Benjamin argued that the *medium is the message*. For the Lion, mirror is not a medium but an image of itself. The very existence of the *medium* is interrogated here.

Whether the reality is inside the mirror or outside the mirror is another question to ponder on. For animals, truth and reality come only through their perspective which is subjective. The whole poem speaks about the impossibility of universal meaning of truth and reality. It argues that it is only a *construct* or it can only be *manufactured*.

The attempt to silence other truths is futile. The postmodern motif of doubt and suspicion of everything can be seen in this poem. All truths are only relative and they are liquid. The poem states-

`` Mirror was like everybody
No, it was not like anybody''

Analysis of Chandrashekhara Kambara's Poem *Aa Mara E Mara*

Written during late 1980es Chandrashekhara Kambara's poem *Aa Mara E Mara* (That tree This tree) compounds the issues of illusion and reality, life and shadow, seen and unseen, presence and absence and so on. The poem opens with a statement "A tree on the banks of the River/ A tree inside the river" Immediately the narration makes rather a simple statement that the 'real' tree is the tree on the banks of the river and its 'mirror' is the tree's image inside the water. Though there are two identical images of a single tree, the root is the only one. It is true that there are two top parts of a tree. From the same root one goes up and the other goes down. In other words, for both real and the illusion, the source is the same. Is somebody climbs up; the image shows him/her climbing down and vice versa.

The poem takes another turn when it makes the statement that the real tragedy of this story is the meeting point of both the trees has disappeared. We cannot "see" the root but can only "imagine". The upper part is visible but the lower part- that of the root is invisible. The meeting point between 'two' trees is blurred. A single source has the ability to construct multiple images. The essence of 'the' tree is unexplainable. A person cannot see both the trees simultaneously. If he/she looks up, the tree in the water is absent, if he/she looks down, the tree on the banks becomes absent. The Post modern motif of the interplay between *presence* and *absence* can be seen here. The ending of the poem again shows the interplay between *illusion* and *reality*. The narrator says if one climbs up he/she has to reach the sky, if one climbs down he/she has to go to the abyss. Both exercises are futile exercises.

The text asks the following critical questions. One is- who decides which is *Bimba* and which is *pratibimbha*? Whoever decides it, the answer is only subjective and partial. The relationship between *presence* and *absence* is only relative. It also raises the question of the meeting point between illusion and reality. Or it argues that the binary divisions are only artificial *constructs.*

To conclude, the two poems are fine examples in subverting stereotypes and artificial conceptual constructions. Both the poems are reflexive, subversive and are rather open ended.

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