



## The Spiritual Progress in the Poetry of T. Vasudeva Reddy

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***Summary:*** *The achievement of T. Vasudeva Reddy as an Indian Poet in English has been widely acclaimed by critics in India and abroad. As a farmer poet hailing from a tiny village of Andhra Pradesh, he has been able to make a distinct contribution to the Indo-English literature. His ability to give uninhibited expression to his experience in rural India, revealing a voice that is both personal and universal, distinguishes him from his fellow poets. The paper aims at presenting the varied visions and voices of the poet in a candid way to show the genius of the poet. While Reddy's wide humanity and sympathy have stood him in good stead in all sorts of weathers, his keenness and sensitivity have made him alive to the presence of an all embracing power that is capable of animating not only the world of nature but also the world of poetry. We find his humanistic and altruistic concerns also gaining a new verve and vigour in his poems.*

The achievement of T. Vasudeva Reddy as an Indian poet in English has been widely acclaimed by critics in India and abroad. As a farmer-poet hailing from a tiny village of Andhra Pradesh, he has been able to make a distinct contribution to the Indo-English literature. His ability to give uninhibited expression to his experiences in rural India, revealing a voice that is both personal and universal, distinguishes him from his fellow poets.

The sincerity and authenticity of Reddy's poetic utterances have apparently been enhanced in a large measure by his aversion to all sorts of distancing and depersonalizing devices. A deliberate decision on his part to steer clear of all such devices is suggested by some of his poems.. He says:

I shall be myself  
without any dissembling (BR, 16)  
with my feet  
rooted to the earth  
I wish to go with you (BR, 26)  
Could! run from myself  
No. ... (FB,7)

The poet's decision in this regard seems to have resulted from a wholesome awareness of his own innate instincts. Besides, he must also have been alive to the relative lack of true sincerity in some of his distinguished predecessors including William Wordsworth. But the poetic method favoured by him has perhaps undermined the efficiency of the tranquilizing process that should normally precede the making of poetry out of raw and intense emotions in accordance with a Wordsworthian definition of it. The method, however, brings him close to the other definition of poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", by Wordsworth himself.

Vasudeva Reddy's poetry has been aptly described as an "outburst of emotion"<sup>1</sup>. The emotional astringency associated with it justifies the replacement of the term "overflow" by "outburst" in its description. Presumably, the poet has no relish for the refrigeration of genuine emotions in the process of making poetry. The endeavour obviously is to present them as they are without diluting their intensity by any means. Having opted for the role of a critic of the society of his time, the adoption of a cold-blooded strategy, consistent with Wordsworthian notions, was a luxury he could hardly afford. For, as is widely realized, the



Wordsworthian strategy was essentially a mask, shorn of its trapping and had rendered the poets integrity suspect He believes-

Polish teaches dissembling  
While sparks of truth slip S  
From his drunken lips. (BR, 12)

His distrust of rhetorics mentioned by A. Russell<sup>2</sup> must have been promoted by his determination to be forthright in his expression.

Consequently when Reddy deals with subjects that are close to his heart, the reader is exposed to the heat of his emotions perhaps to an excessive degree. 'On the Death of Mrs. Indira Gandhi' (FB,32), 'In Memoriam' (MM, 30), and 'In Exile' (FB, 28) may testify to that fact. Again, when the called leading lights of his day are ridiculed in several other poems, we are often dumb-founded:

their panchayat is a crafty cobweb  
pregnant with potent poison (BR, 11)  
the shallow slogans -  
of our elected leaders  
grieve the ruins (BR, 30)

while masses groan under his vain promises his relatives revel in ill-gotten wealth;

The elected leader leads his caste  
the self styled saviour saves his kindered; (FB, 33)  
For democracy he seems to be the head -  
while his henchmen sever many a head  
he wins by spreading the pall of dread -  
and slices of momentary bread. (MM, 11)

Such poems, evocative as they are of the well-known satires of the Augustan Age, are bound to be significant mainly as records of typical Indian experiences. Of course, they also bear testimony to exemplary-courage on the part of the poet.

Prof. K. Venkatachari has thrown a flood of light on the satiric- vision of Reddy. He points out how the latter's satires traverse from the general to the particular and rise to the universal.<sup>3</sup>

E. R. Kaltovich has commended the incomparable fusion of biting satire and poetics in Reddy's poetry. What distinguishes his satires from the works of better known poets of his time the deep humanistic concern in which they are embedded.<sup>4</sup>

Prof. David Kerr has drawn attention to the sociological consciousness and earnest concern for the weal of the society revealed in his poetry.<sup>5</sup> Rosemary C. Wilkinson has observed how, his subjectivism soars to ,the higher Level of universality.<sup>6</sup> Prof. Y.P. Singh has highlighted the universality of his poetry.<sup>7</sup> If T.S. Eliot could place W.B. Yeats on a high pedestal in view of the deeper and more substantial impersonality, that borders on universality, found in his later poetry<sup>8</sup>, one should not grudge allowing a place of honour to Vasudeva Reddy in the galaxy of Indo-English poets.

All the same, one cannot help thinking that such satires, surcharged as they are with noble sentiments, often tend to' be rather suffocating, notwithstanding the sardonic humour produced by them. The musical quality of his verse that has earned him high praise<sup>9</sup> does little to 'relieve that suffocation. The impression at times is of a relative lack of intellectual control over the emotions expressed.

When emotions are thus allowed to get the upper hand in poetry, the situation that arises may seem analogous to the one that prevailed in the early years of the twentieth century. We are aware how the modernists, led by T.S. Eliot, responded to it, and sought to idealize John Donne, whose poetic technique provided for both thought and emotion going hand- in-hand in poetry. But Eliot himself apparently modified-



his stance in this regard when he praised the forthright and uninhibited style of the later Yeats although it obviously lacked adequate cerebral control.

The social reformer in Vasudeva Reddy has perhaps sapped his artistic virtuosity at times. If some of us are inclined to brush aside his satiric verse on that score, we should not lose sight of its intrinsic significance and social commitment.

Mercifully enough, a good number of poems of other kinds, too, are found in Reddy's collections. And some of them reveal his capacity for sensitive, imaginative and insightful perception of nature as well as human nature. They also throw hints of salutary progress in the course of his poetic life.

**The poetry of Reddy published so far, has come in four collections-** When Grief Rains, The Broken Rhythms, The Fleeting Bubbles, and Melting Melodies. Significantly enough, his poetic life has its beginning when grief rains and led him to melting melodies. R. S. Sudarshanam has found a transition of mood in his poetry from futility to anger, from anger to calmness, and from calmness to prayerful acceptance. He considers it typical of an Indian experience.<sup>10</sup> What is achieved in the process seems to be a spiritual progress which is perhaps universal rather than Indian. Such a development has, in fact, been characteristic of the lives of some illustrious figures of World literatures including T.S. Eliot. A closer look at the corpus of Reddy's poetry, published hitherto, with a view to determining the possible influences that helped bring about a welcome transformation in his poetry, is bound to be interesting and rewarding.

Reddy's poetry began on a dreary and dismal note in its early phase:

Jilted by crafty clouds  
the sun-burnt crop looked  
like a dissected corpse  
on the post-mortem table (WGR, 28)  
Life is an endless desert  
fill of sands and storms, no cases. (WGL 14)  
A flutter of wings:  
the sky squawked in requiem. (WGR, 14).

The nothingness around me gapes and gasps;  
It hardly breathes- baneful breeze: (WGR, 24)

The mood of deep depression projected through those lines reminds us of the Hardyman predicament characterized by utter lack of faith in the divine dispensation of justice. And presumably, the postmortem table portrayed here ones a little the celebrated image of a patient etherized upon a table in T. S. Eliot's 'Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock'.<sup>11</sup> Yet we cannot rule out the possibility of these images symbolizing the poet's own inner landscape. And it may be less than fair to assume that the emotions expressed here are either false or exaggerated. Such an assumption is bound to be insinuating as it suggests a kinship between the poet and the Decadents of the nineteenth century. But the degree of intensity and integrity revealed in the poetry of Reddy may absolve him of the charge of falsity or exaggeration. Moreover, the poet's confession -

Still somewhere in me  
A dim desire creeps  
to possess the instinctive mackintosh. (WGR, 25)

Speaks of a complexity that runs counter to the deleterious tendency to allow himself to be submerged by debilitating emotions. Again, when darkness invades his desolate spirit and saps his sinking soul, we are assured, "Yonder the glow-worm drifts in the dark." (WGR, 27)

One might presume that the macabre quality of the image in T.S. Eliot's love-song resulted from a deliberate attempt on his part to deromanticize poetry as from the feebleness of his own faith. But the situation in which Reddy has presented the image did not seem to have warranted a deliberate bid of that kind.



His primary concern must have been to be true to himself and to the landscape portrayed. The fact that he has chosen to present such a dreadful picture in isolation may be suggestive of the absence of a comprehensive vision in him at that point of time.

The lack of a vision of the kind in the poet is suggested when he says:

The earth is round  
Like a pointless top it revolves (WGR, 22)  
I am alone, a forsaken man  
alone man with a desperate will  
to drift the rudderless course  
to safe shores ... (FB,9)  
Still I steer rudderless  
Gazing at the faint star  
Vainly hoping to come ashore (FB, 16)

The gazing at the faint star may symbolize a desire in the poet to have a strong and assuring faith. Such a faith might well have provided a point to the pointless top and a rudder to his rudderless course. The faintness of that faith, as it exists in him at the moment, is also hinted at by the line. Similar sentiments, projected earlier by Thomas Hardy in a comparable situation, keep reverberating in his poetry time and again:

You have sustained the life of the Lord - who does not redeem you.

Find your own saviour ... (WGR, 16)  
While holy harmony rests in cemetery,  
heads of sweat boil on stone walls  
still the maker is quiet in the grave (WGR, 32)

What distinguishes the poet from Thomas Hardy is his tendency to keep oscillating between faith and doubt. A poem that records an awakening on his part, for instance, is soon followed by another portraying his lack of faith:

The mystic "Om" filled the torpid mind  
And heart. seized all the senses  
Entered flesh and blood and every nerve. (WGR, 40)  
The exit of the gasping breath alone  
Shell release me from the lingering pain. (WGR, 41)

We may remember how Hardy remained relatively firm in his lack of faith throughout and. revealed an adamant character unlike him.

We have reason to believe that a feeble faith remained with Reddy even in his early phase. In fact, he was painfully aware of its inadequacy:

Around a pinch of faith,  
an army of dark bodies  
roll in waves of countless doubts; (WGR, 26)

It is quite some time before his faith begins to assert itself. An unambiguous reference to it is found oily at the end of his third collection of poems:

I hear the breath of an unseen force  
Formidable and inscrutable in nature  
In the midst of deep mystery around me  
I feel the grace of the Supreme Being. (FB, 39)

It is perhaps natural that the collection of poems that follows is *Melting Melodies*.

Man's vision, we are told, can redeem the world filling it with mystery, meaning and human gratitude for





existence. Indeed it is a thing for which he had yearned for long.

In the new phase, things which are chill and drab earlier gain a new animation:

Every piece of ruin, a marvel of art in stone,  
carves a mute message, echoes a faded epic -  
each tiny speck an iridescent luminous spark (MM, 5)

The poet himself becomes aware of the transformation brought about by his new, invigorated faith soon enough, as he starts singing in praise of God in an exhilarated tone:

Those that believe me  
bathe in the Manasa lake  
and tread the celestial land  
spread with gold dust  
the rest know no rest  
and end up in the dust. (MM, 44)

Thy unseen presence is now my strength  
to sail and strive, thrive and not to fall. (MM, 42)

In the absence of an abiding faith to light up his world and sustain spirits, the poet was able to draw comfort from his earthly relationships:

Don't quit my love -  
without you  
why should I be here  
and lose my identity  
in the prison of a world (FB, 13)

We may recall how Matthew Arnold had tried to impress on his wife long ago the need of being true to each other as there was nothing worthy of their trust in the world. What is evidenced in the earlier poetry of Reddy is a problem of far greater gravity. In as much as the values of life have been eclipsed almost irretrievably in the new context.

We find his humanistic and altruistic concerns also gaining a new verve and vigour in the wake of his new convictions as he prays to the Lord of the Sacred Hills: "Fill our hearts with selfless love / Sow in our lives seeds of light." (MM, 43)

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