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COLLAGE AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE OF RAGAVENDRA RAO'S

The Journey to Golgotha

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COLLAGE AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE OF RAGAVENDRA RAO'S *The Journey to Golgotha*

Kalyani, Ph.D.

A Little Known Poem

The Journey to Golgotha is a little known poem, from the pen of an almost forgotten great Indian modernist poet, K. Raghavendra Rao. But, as great poems go, this one survives not only because of its content, focus and relevance, but also because of its style and technique of narration in short verses. The poem was originally published in the *Poetry Magazine* in its volume 93, January 1959, page 252.

Writing Epics on Sages, Heroes, Divine Beings, Et al.

Writing epics about sages, saints, gods and divinity is an age-old Indian tradition. Most of the earlier works of this genre were long poems with several cantos. For example, Kamban's *Ramayanam* in Tamil is one of the longest poems (epics) in Tamil literature. Even the shorter works of Sangam literature, flourishing about 2000 years ago, which talk about the divinity and their abodes, run into several hundred lines and narrate the story in somewhat straightforward manner, with, of course, pregnant metaphors and suggestions. Later innovations that were added to the biographical poems or epics were carefully choreographed to take care of the milestones or stages of the growth of the lead character of the poem. Thus, piLLaitamil, literally Tamil [literary works] about the childhood of lead characters, were written in praise of gods, et al.

Biographical Poems

As Dr. K. Ramasamy, a leading Tamil literary scholar, writes, <http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2002/pillaitamil.html>

In the Tamil literary tradition, there is a distinctive literary genre called **piLLaitamiL^h ilakkiyam**, (literally, the literature of child or childhood Tamil), which deals with the narration of the childhood of a god/goddess, or hero/heroine. The first available literary work of this genre belongs to the 12th century A.D., called *kulo:ttungac co:L^han piLLaitamiL^h*. However, references to this genre are found even in the earliest Tamil grammar, *Tolkappiyam* (300 B.C.?) This grammar recognizes "childhood" as a distinctive theme within Tamil literature (sutra 1030). Stages of childhood have been referred to in several works that were composed after *Tolkappiyam*. For example, *Tirukkural* expresses its great admiration for the babbling of the infants as giving great pleasure to the ear, "more melodious and sweeter than pipe and lute." Tamil language use treats "child" and "god" as synonymous in its various expressions." Hundreds of such works are being written even today on important political leaders such as Kamaraj and M.G.Ramachandran.

Not On Actual Childhood

Dr. Ramasamy gives us another interesting insight that is relevant to at least on puzzling expression Raghavendra Rao's *Journey*. Dr. Ramasamy writes:

Remember, the focus is not on the actual childhood of the subjects. More often than not, the childhood is reconstructed in an imaginary manner befitting the great roles played by the gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines later in their adulthood.

Indian Christian Innovations and Improvisations

Not to be left behind in this poetic or epic venture, some Catholic priests requested a great modern Tamil poet KaNNadaasan to write an epic on Jesus. And this work is called *Iyesu Kaaviyam*, Epic on the Story of Jesus. Earlier, in an earlier century, the Italian Catholic missionary-priest and a great Tamil scholar, Beschi (1693-1742), wrote a long epic poem in Tamil on salvation through Jesus Christ as a journey, based on *Pilgrim's Progress*. In recent years the motif of Infant Jesus has attracted several Tamil poets to write on the marvelous characteristics and deeds of Infant Jesus.

Raghavendra Rao's Poem on the Passion of Christ – Breaking New Ground

Read in this background of established tradition in some Indian languages, Raghavendra Rao's short poem (**The Journey to Golgotha**) on the journey of Jesus toward Golgotha breaks new ground in Indian writing in English. For one thing, he was not writing his poem in an Indian language *per se*. He was not telling Jesus' story to impress upon his audience about the marvelous nature of Jesus' being, as Indian traditions would demand in most cases when stories of divine beings are narrated. Raghavendra Rao, on the other hand, takes the story as it is, and imposes on it his own twist.

The Poem

Let us reproduce the poem for us to understand its meaning and focus:

THE JOURNEY TO GOLGOTHA

Children are frightening,
Complex beyond - all adult illusions,
paradoxical in their calculated innocence!

Beware of them,
and so a king in a merry old-tale
killed every child to kill one child —
but one child lived yet.
the child that was himself
hidden in the folds of an ugly ageing flesh!

Oh, king of those wild wastes, our hearts,

you moved once in the Biblical bazaars,
among fishermen and farmers,
lepers and prostitutes,
and your breath was a miracle!

Innocence suffers in the end always,
for it is always misunderstood —

so you, your jasmine face under a crown of laughing thorns,
lean king of visionary kingdoms,

you carried a cross to the castle of skull, Golgotha!
Deeper the friendship, nobler the betrayal,

and in any case, the thirty silvers settled it —
but was the betrayal so clever?

What of those other betrayals,
judge betraying justice
a father betraying his son,
and the flesh betraying the spirit?

Look how you will, this is a day of riddles —
of two thieves, a friend, a judge, and a sorrow,
or of flesh and blood, bread and wine
Give me my Christ of kids,
Christ shaped of candy,
melting in the mouth of my dying poems —
mercy be for all of us,
mercy for the body burning in the wind of time!

A Collage of Events

In this poem the life of Christ is set against the backdrop of a journey, the ultimate journey toward Golgotha upon which mount Jesus would be crucified. The different phases of the life of Jesus are portrayed in fragments. As in a collage, they are juxtaposed to each other. The panorama of the journey to Golgotha is evoked through snatches of images, metaphors, transferred epithets and paradoxes with the life of Jesus from birth to crucifixion. The journey can also be the journey of the poet with the reader to Golgotha. The course and purpose of the journey is gradually unfolded with the fulfillment of the purpose.

The First Stage

The first stage of the journey brings out the significance of the birth of Jesus. The term 'calculated innocence' is paradoxical. That Jesus, God Himself and a member of the Trinity, chose to be born, as a human child, is calculated innocence, a deliberate and premeditated act. In addition, the question is how could children be frightening? Except for the reason that the incarnation of Jesus in human child form made all children

frightening to evil doers? Children were frightening to King Herod. Herod looked for the incoming King of an earthly kingdom, but Jesus was born to be the King of all kings and rule the Kingdom of Heaven. What a tragic cruelty: *to kill every child to kill one child!*

The Second Stage

The reference to the 'King in a merry old tale' in the second stage of the poem, is none other than Herod the great. He was cruel, cunning and cold blooded. It was he who slew the children of Bethlehem in an effort to kill Christ who survived. Herod was "Afraid that this little child was going to interfere with his life, his place, his power, his influence and therefore his first instinct was to destroy him."

"The child that was himself hidden in the folds of an ugly ageing flesh!" is yet another paradoxical statement, which explains how the prophecies down the ages concerning the coming of Jesus Christ were fulfilled in this child. The mystery, which had been hid from eyes and proclaimed by the prophets, is now made manifest to the world.

However, we could also offer another level of interpretation: the term 'The Child' could refer to King Herod who was still a child, ignorant and immature though old as expressed in the words 'ugly ageing flesh.' A double meaning that adds an interesting dimension to this short poem

The Third Stage

Stage three of the journey refers to Jesus as a King of the wild wastes. The experience of Jesus in the wilderness where he was tempted for forty days and nights is here recalled. It was here that the devil made repeated attempts to tempt him but failed.

The ministry of Jesus was in public square and for the poor and the needy such as fishermen, farmers, illiterates, lepers, prostitutes, et al. Could there be any place more public than the bazaars? The reference is to the simple, loving life of Jesus among the scum of this world. He had come to redeem the ordinary folks. At his command, the breath, he was able to heal all.

The Fourth Stage

The following lines graphically portray the next phase of the journey of Jesus Christ:

Innocence suffers in the end always,
for it is always misunderstood -
So you, your jasmine face under a crown of laughing thorns,
lean King of visionary kingdoms,
you carried a cross to the castle of skull, Golgotha!

I immensely like the phrase *jasmine face*, a typically Asian/Indian expression of love that is intimate and very personal. *Jasmine* is a very personal, favorite fragrant flower, although *rose* often is highly valued in the western world to denote expressions of love. Jasmine is more relevant to the Indian context from which this young and modernist poet began his career as a poet in 1950s. How about the impact of *Mysore Mallige?!*

Look at another phrase: *a crown of laughing thorns*. What do the thorns laugh at? Laughter amidst pain; not even smile, it is laughter! Or does the crown is simply the symbol of mockery committed on the body of Jesus by the Roman soldiers? Again we have a paradoxical statement here.

Innocence

The word 'Innocence' reiterates the fact that he who was innocent, not guilty of any crime, was misunderstood. The metaphor 'Jasmine Face' strongly implies the calm and bright face of Jesus. If literally interpreted the crown of thorns appear to mock his calm face. As a transferred epithet it would mean that the people were laughing and deriding him. Still at another level, Jesus himself is laughing at the ignorance of the people around him who tortured him, ignorant of his Godhood and ignorant of his Second Coming in judgment.

Metaphorically 'The lean king' would suggest that Jesus gave up everything and emptied himself in order to become man. He, indeed, came to establish 'The visionary kingdom of God'.

Sudden Shifts

From lines ten to nineteen there is a sudden shift to the second person narrative when the poet directly addresses Jesus. Golgotha is called 'The Castle of Skull'. The presence of the king has transformed the place of skull, the place of execution, a castle.

Fusing Syntax with Sense

The flash back in the next two lines specifically leads the reader to the betrayal of Judas Iscariot for thirty pieces of silver. 'Deeper the friendship, nobler the betrayal' is a paradox which successfully fuses the syntax with sense. "Greater love hath no man than this that a man give his life for his friends." Life is the most precious thing a man has, the life is all he is; the life is himself. This is the highest measure of love when a man gives his life he holds nothing back, he gives all he has and is. So deep is this friendship, betrayal of such a Jesus is nobler because Judas enables him to fulfill the purpose for which he came into to this world.

The interrogative statement 'But was the Betrayal so clever!' is pertinent because Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas would betray him .

In the next question the words, 'Flesh betraying the spirit,' figuratively dramatizes the weakness and the degraded state of man.

An Address to the Reader

The following three lines addressed to the reader recalls the experience of Jesus at Golgotha and also reminds one of the fulfillment of the purpose of the coming of Jesus.

Look how you will, this is a day of riddles -
of two thieves, a friend, a judge and a sorrow,
or of flesh and blood, bread and wine!

Theologically and figuratively the above lines offer an interesting study on the significance of Christ's crucifixion.

The Bread and Wine

The line 'of flesh and blood, bread and wine' depicts his very self, the living bread who came down from heaven and gave life to the whole world. It is a riddle because we have to choose between the actual drama "of two thieves, a friend, a judge and a sorrow," and "flesh and blood, bread and wine" as the original intent of all this sorrowful drama. The drama is a wonderful thing, deserving faith, a thing beyond all human understanding for those who repose and reposed faith in Jesus the God-Man, or merely a tragic story for the bystanders. Raghavendra Rao, pointing out to the dilemma that we all face, presents both the positions elegantly.

The Last Stage

The very last section of the poem focuses on the poet's appeal and prayer. He expresses a sense of inadequacy as he feels he cannot comprehend all about Christ. His understanding of Jesus Christ is still like that of a child when he remarks,

Give me my Christ of kids,
A Christ shaped of candy,
melting in the mouth of my dying poems.

He ends with yet another image with prayer for mercy for all the people who are 'Burning in the wind of time.' Or is it simply the poet is asking for mercy for all those sinners burning in hell?

Full of Double Meanings

Raghavendra Rao's **Journey to Golgotha** is full of double meanings, line by line. He has an interesting understanding of the story of Jesus Christ and uses this understanding to look beyond the words that tell the story. He brings out new interpretations from the perspectives of the characters in this drama and takes the readers with him on a journey to Golgotha. He uses collage as a narrative device to recreate the events of the life of Jesus.

In this forceful and mostly sympathetic narrative, with economy of expression and great precision, he mixes values, facts and his own interpretation (for example, his statement that the Father has betrayed the Son). The images, metaphors, paradoxes and interrogative statements demonstrate the richness of his thought and feeling.

Even at the end, however, one only wonders about Raghavendra Rao's own personal acceptance of the claim of Jesus as Lord and Savior. So, in every aspect this short narrative poem is an invitation to the readers to indulge in their own imagination, understanding, interpretation, and admiration of Jesus.

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