

## **R. Parthasarathy's English Poetry: Reflections of Indianness and the Dilemma of Rootlessness**

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### **Abstract**

This article delves into the intricacies of R. Parthasarathy's poetry, mainly focusing on his exploration of Indianness and the dilemma of rootlessness. Through an analysis of Parthasarathy's seminal work "Rough Passage," the article elucidates the poet's profound struggle with language, identity, and cultural belonging. Parthasarathy's candid reflections on his experiences in England, his longing for home, and his search for roots form the crux of the discussion, highlighting the complexities inherent in the Indian poet's engagement with English as a medium of expression. Drawing on themes of isolation, displacement, and longing, Parthasarathy's poetry offers a nuanced depiction of self-discovery amidst the flux of modernity and tradition. Ultimately, the article underscores the enduring relevance of Parthasarathy's poetry in navigating the intersections of culture, memory, and identity in the postcolonial Indian context.

**Keywords:** Indianness, rootlessness, colonialism, identity, language, cultural belonging

### **Introduction:**

Rajagopal Parthasarathy, popularly known as R. Parthasarathy, is an Indian English poet famous for *Rough Passage*, a collection of poems about his experiences in the West and his journey back to India, his home. Though many things come up as one explores Parthasarathy's poetic output, his longing for home, dilemmas about the medium of expression that engulf his poetry, and a sense of fulfillment as the poet returns to India supersedes everything else! A careful analysis of Parthasarathy's oeuvre elicits a striking detail – the poet's eagerness to express (and assert) his Indianness while, in the subconscious, his acceptance of being rootless.

Rajagopal Parthasarathy's poetic odyssey encapsulates a profound struggle with the complexities of expression in English, reflecting a multifaceted journey marked by dilemmas, disillusionment, and introspection. As an esteemed poet in the realm of Indian English literature, Parthasarathy grapples with a myriad of challenges while seeking to articulate his Indian sensibilities within the confines of the English language. Initially drawn to the allure of English as a medium of literary expression,

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Parthasarathy embarks on his poetic endeavors with curiosity and exploration. However, his journey soon becomes fraught with alienation and confusion as he navigates the intricate terrain of language and identity. Despite his mastery of the English language, Parthasarathy finds himself increasingly constrained by its limitations, struggling to convey the richness and depth of his Indian heritage. As he delves deeper into his craft, Parthasarathy confronts the inherent inadequacies of English in capturing the nuances of Indian culture and thought, leading to a profound sense of disillusionment. This disillusionment stems from the linguistic barriers and the cultural and historical baggage associated with the English language in the Indian context. Parthasarathy grapples with the legacy of colonialism, which casts a long shadow over his attempts to articulate an authentic Indian voice in English. Despite his best efforts, Parthasarathy finds himself at a crossroads, torn between the desire to preserve his cultural heritage and the constraints imposed by the language of his colonial past. He admits in an interview:

*"I decided that England would be my future home. Moreover, the English language would help me belong there. In my ignorance, I even hoped for fame as an English poet. However, events were to prove otherwise. The English autumn was too much for my expanding tropical petals. In England, at last, history caught up with me: I was crushed under two hundred years of British rule in India. I began to have qualms about my integrity as an Indian. . . . Here was an England I was unable to come to terms with."*

(Quoted by Feroza Jussawalla 124)

Parthasarathy's candid reflection on his aspirations and subsequent disillusionment with England and the English language encapsulates the profound complexities inherent in the Indian poet's struggle with language, identity, and cultural belonging. Initially drawn to the allure of England as a potential home and the English language as a means of integration and recognition, Parthasarathy harbored hopes of achieving fame as a poet in English, unaware of the challenges ahead. However, his optimism soon gave way to harsh reality as he was ill-equipped to navigate England's cultural and climatic differences, leading to alienation and displacement. The English autumn, with its stark contrast to the tropical landscapes of his native India, served as a metaphor for the insurmountable barriers he encountered in his quest for acceptance and belonging. Moreover, Parthasarathy's experience in England forced him to confront the enduring legacy of British colonialism, which cast a long shadow over his sense of identity and integrity as an Indian. As he grappled with the weight of two centuries of British rule in India, Parthasarathy questioned his authenticity and cultural heritage, struggling to reconcile his Indian identity with the dominant narratives of Englishness and colonial power. In this context, Parthasarathy's admission that he could not come to terms with England underscores the profound sense of dislocation and disenchantment he experienced, highlighting the inherent tensions between language, culture, and colonial history in the Indian poet's engagement with English literature.

Parthasarathy discusses this disillusionment in his poetry as well. In one of the poems from his collection *Rough Passage*, the poet writes:

*"He had spent his youth whoring  
after English gods.  
There is something to be said for exile:  
You learn roots are profound."  
(Parthasarathy 75)*

In this evocative extract, the poet reflects on his youthful pursuit of English ideals and the subsequent revelations that come with exile. Through the metaphorical language of "whoring after English gods," Parthasarathy acknowledges his past aspirations and infatuations with Western ideals, symbolizing a longing for acceptance and validation within the cultural framework of Englishness. However, the poet's experiences in exile lead to a profound realization: the deeper roots of identity and belonging lie in one's native heritage. Through the juxtaposition of youthful folly and the wisdom gained from exile, Parthasarathy captures the transformative journey of self-discovery and the recognition of the intrinsic value of one's roots, especially when away from one's homeland.

Search for roots takes the poet into his Tamil past. Parthasarathy looks at the past with a critical yet affectionate gaze, recognizing its significance as a mode of recreating the present and integrating it into the grand flow of tradition. Initially discontent with the present state of his homeland due to encountered changes and uncertainties, Parthasarathy's discontent does not lead him to outright rejection of the present as dull, insipid, or disaffectionate. Instead, he gradually learns to adapt his sensibility to embrace the evolving landscape of his surroundings, ultimately identifying himself with the place and its milieu. This transformative process culminates in the "Homecoming," where the poet completely assimilates the grand flow of his native tradition, acclimatizing himself to its rhythms and nuances. Through this nuanced exploration of the relationship between past and present, Parthasarathy illuminates the complexities of cultural identity and the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in the Indian context.

*"How long can foreign poets  
Provide the staple of your lines.  
Turn inward. Scrape the bottom of your past."  
(Rough Passage 50)*

Parthasarathy openly shows his anguish and frustration. He finds himself disenchanted following the English tradition of writing poetry. Therefore, the disillusioned poet looks for something native. He searches for connections to the past and finds the perfect thread to pull himself to the shore – a family reunion. He writes:

*"And so it eventually happened—  
a family reunion not heard of  
since grandfather died in '59—in March  
This year. Cousins arrived in Tirhuchchanur  
in overcrowded private buses,  
the dust of unlettered years  
clouding instant recognition."  
(Parthasarathy 81)*

In this poignant extract from Parthasarathy's poem, the poet abbreviates the profound significance of a family reunion, marking a rare occurrence not witnessed since the grandfather's passing in 1959. Set against the backdrop of Tirhuchchanur, the reunion unfolds amidst the arrival of cousins in overcrowded private buses, symbolizing a convergence of familial ties and the passage of time. The imagery of "the dust of unlettered years" evokes a sense of nostalgia and the enduring legacy of ancestral traditions, underscoring the depth of familial connections that transcend temporal boundaries. Through this provocative portrayal, Parthasarathy explores themes of heritage, memory, and the cyclical nature of familial relationships.

It is remarkable that the poet rejects the sophisticated transportation of the West for the "overcrowded private buses" of his native land and would instead revel in the "dust of unlettered years" instead of enjoying the polished oblivion that England offered him. Parthasarathy asserts his subscription to traditional Indian values, family reunions, and get-togethers in times of distress and tragedy. However, he does not let the opportunity to satirize slip and highlights that distance and forgetfulness of years may cloud "instant recognition." Nevertheless, he celebrates the memories of the past and remembers the "familiar coconuts" and "rice-and-pickle afternoons" later in the same poem (81). Parthasarathy's celebration of the past, as Sangita Padhi notes, assists in providing solace to his present:

*"He recognizes and uses the past as a mode of recreating the present, and he treats it as a part of the grand flow of the tradition he belongs to."*

(Indian Poetry in English 70)

The need to reunite with the past arises after consciously recognizing the uprooted feeling. Rootlessness creates alienation in the mind of the poet while abroad. Naturally, this sense of alienation and rootlessness permeates the poetry of Parthasarathy. The 'Exile' section of the book *Rough Passage* deals with the issues of alienation, existential crisis, and the aftermath of colonialism. The story follows the life of an Indian poet who assumed he would settle in England and write as an 'English' poet. However, his experience of studying abroad creates a crisis for him, ultimately leading to disillusionment and the realization of his Indian identity. Once the poet is aware of his Indian identity, the realization of rootlessness strikes his conscience frequently. He can not enjoy the nature in Europe. He can not find peace in the noisy streets of England. He can not become a part of the rush on the streets of an alien land. Parthasarathy writes:

*"lanes full of smoke and litter,  
with puddles of unwashed  
English children."*

(Parthasarathy 75)

The poet's life experience in England is trying, so he returns to India. However, Parthasarathy is acutely aware of the challenges and expectations his 'homecoming' holds for him. Though he decides to return enthusiastically, an implicit reluctance lurks in his journey. The poet writes:

*"I return home, tired,  
My face pressed against the window*

*of expectation."*  
(Parthasarathy 84)

Though the poet appears content, he also realizes that home is not quite what it used to be. Longing for home was present in England; longing for the past is present in India. After painting pastoral scenes of family life and reflecting on the decay of Tamil culture, 'Homecoming' brings the poet back to the present, where he earns a living and presumably writes in Madras. Despite being surrounded by the familiarity of his surroundings, the poet finds himself once again alone, grappling with memories, choices, and the complexities of marriage. As he confronts the decisions and illusions of his past, Parthasarathy acknowledges the task ahead of him: shaping a poem of his life. The poignant realization that he has "exchanged the world for a table and chair" underscores the sobering acceptance of his current circumstances. Despite discontent, the poet resigns to his fate, acknowledging that complaining serves no purpose. Bruce King, a noted scholar and critic, captures this dilemma of disillusionment with home, exile, and homecoming wonderfully in his seminal book *Modern Indian Poetry in English*:

*"Usually it was dissatisfaction with life at home which drove [him] abroad to begin with; returning home in search of an ideal, they find [his] alienation has increased and [he] is now even more uprooted."* (239)

In "Rough Passage," Parthasarathy's poetry serves not only as a register of his disillusionment with the passage of time, geographical displacement, and linguistic barriers but also as a testament to his quest for transcendence. This transcendence is achieved through the poet's acceptance of his circumstances and proactive pursuit of a usable past. Like many postcolonial poets, Parthasarathy recognizes the significance of his roots both as an individual and a poet. Consequently, he sincerely tries reconnecting with his homeland, seeking warmth, love, and security to alleviate his alienation. Through his introspective exploration of identity and belonging, Parthasarathy offers readers a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of navigating the intersections of culture, memory, and self-discovery.

Parthasarathy's poetry is a beautiful reflection of the Indian way of life. His words embody the essence of Indian culture, and his verses speak of a deep longing for roots and a solid connection to one's past. What sets Parthasarathy's poetry apart is his ability to convey a sense of detachment from one's Karmas, which is a quintessential Indian quality. His poems are a testament to the fact that one can achieve a sense of satisfaction and reconciliation with one's past without remorse for the decisions made earlier in life. The lines in Parthasarathy's poetry mirror his disillusionment, longing for roots, and urge to let the world know what it truly means to live in the Indian milieu.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the poetry of R. Parthasarathy encapsulates a profound exploration of Indianness and the dilemma of rootlessness within the realm of Indian English literature. Through his introspective verses, Parthasarathy navigates the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural heritage, grappling with the challenges posed by language, displacement, and colonial legacies. His candid

reflections on England's allure, the English language's limitations, and the quest for roots underscore the multifaceted nature of the Indian poet's struggle with linguistic and cultural identity. Despite the disillusionment and alienation he experiences, Parthasarathy's poetry ultimately serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring resilience of the human spirit and the profound connections that bind individuals to their past, present, and future. As he delves into homecoming, nostalgia, and self-discovery themes, Parthasarathy invites readers on a transformative journey of introspection and understanding, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of Indian English poetry. Even though a perceivable tension pervades the poetry of Parthasarathy, the restlessness and incessant struggle to unite with an elusive Indian identity add tremendous value to his lone poetry collection!

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