CHAPTER VII

R. PARTHASARATHY: THE QUEST FOR THE SELF IN LOVE
Robert Langbaum in The Poetry of Experience points out that "the romantic quality of mind grows out of a total crisis of personality." The poet seeks his values in scrutinizing his own sensations and reactions, and in the process, all the factors which contribute to his living and his awareness of living are focused upon. The sense of the self as an experiencing agent manifests itself in two kinds of imaginative expression. As Patricia M. Ball explains, these are distinguished by Keats as the modes of the "egotistical sublime" and "the chameleon" poet. The association of these modes within the creative imagination of Parthasarathy becomes apparent when we notice in the first section, "Exile," the poet's uniquely individual response to the place and the experiences which he passed through and the sense of predicament of exile in general which he has conveyed. The image of "the bone urn of my mind" (24) relates the poet not to the egotistical sublime but to a creative effort which has its roots in the very tradition to which the poet belongs and from which he has been exiled. Whether the writing is dramatically or directly about himself, what is sought by a poet like Parthasarathy is
his own identity. The quest is always to recover and to possess it.

In "Trial," we notice a clear change in the tone of the protagonist's voice. In "Exile," he tried one source of fulfilment or the other. At the end of what is called "the odyssey of the self," the cultural emigree is severely disenchanted, feels alienated even at home, and decides to carry on his passage through a different motif altogether. "Trial" faithfully records the protagonist's attempts to continue the task of self-assessment. He no longer explores the geographical sphere but moves into the inner recesses of his mind. "Trial" portrays sensitively the protagonist's sense of near-fulfilment and his frustration for the second time. The taste of death's annulling power of all that we love and cherish while we live sets the dominant tone of the poems under this part.

If "Exile" shows the persona's intellectual and objective self in relation to the environment around him, "Trial" depicts a plunge into the personal experience of love. As Parthasarathy comments, "The strength
of the poem derives from his (poet’s) sense of responsibility towards crucial personal events in his life."
Death of the protagonist’s close relatives has sobered him and he speaks "nothing but good" (29) about them.
Along with the other concerns of the persona, the problem of being a human being and of growing into his own distinctive self makes him go over in his mind the period of his youthful love. While the bliss of love lasts, it seems to compose the self’s "rough passage." As an ideal, love serves the protagonist as a mode of arriving at a fairly tangible picture of his self. But love is mysterious, it transports the lovers into ethereal realms, and yet is realized through sensuous enjoyment. The emphasis is on the sensations felt by the bodily self of the protagonist which nevertheless partakes of an ethereal quality:

I grasp your hand
in a rainbow of touch.

("Trial 1," 29)

Love is realized as an affair of inter-subjectivity and is full of possibilities for sharply unveiling the individual self of the lover. It defines what one is and
at the same time what one can be. As William A. Sadler observes, "The realization of the individual self is not a goal in itself but rather, within the bounds of love, comes as a gift." Having whored after alien gods, the protagonist now seeks the redemption of his gross self through the celebration of one of the chief emotions of life, that is, love. As a grown-up man of forty five years he reminisces how he has been watching a girl called Suneeti from a tender age. A playmate of his childhood, she becomes the object of his endearing attention. While watching the physical and emotional growth of the friend, the observer registers his own growing response to configurations of intimacy:

Hand on chin, you grew up,
all agog, on the cook's succulent
folklore. You rolled yourself

into a ball the afternoon Father died,
till time unfurled you
like a peal of bells.

("Trial 2," 30)

The experience of love, however, cannot produce durable and permanent joy. Bodily pleasure leaves the persona
of the poem with a feeling of incompleteness. In the darkness of the night, the ritual of bodily love is carried on without any insight gained into each other's self. The urgent cravings of the flesh do not, however, make way for the hunger of the mind for a clear knowledge of the self. The imagery of brittleness suggests the fragility of passions:

But in the dark, hands and lips have marked the spot
we touched. Still as crockery, now, rinsed and dried after half-a-day's legitimate use.

("Trial 3," 31)

In his onward journey to arrive at an unfailing source of realization of his self, the aspiring persona comes across a whole spate of possibilities in love. In the poem, time, in its historical pulsations through the remote past down to the immediate present, has been sliced and imaged through its symbolic equivalents like sun, hourglass, chronometer, morning, evening, and night. The hot sun has not only affirmed the protagonist's brown skin but has draped the city of Bombay in a dazzling light resembling cigarette ash. It has also skimmed the
Tamil language and worn it to a shadow. The hourglass of Tamil Nadu is replaced by the exact chronometer of Europe. Nearly all vital experiences of the protagonist are said to have taken place either in the night or by the evening. In its broad view of the world around, the self of the protagonist has reckoned time as an external factor. It has been represented more as an oppressive physical harshness than as a felt content of the inner consciousness. But in "Trial," time is reckoned in terms of hours as urgent immediacies glowing into "incandescence." The persona feels that he and his beloved have become the centre of the world. All the while, his sense of exile, alienation, and void has bred in him a feeling of distance from the other and so frustrated him from attaining a sense of identity and knowing his true self. Even with the distance reduced, the persona feels that the love affair with his beloved is not wholly world-oblivious. A sense of lack of fulfilment never deserts him. Mere thought of sexual ecstasy makes him feel close to his beloved:

... your flesh
was the glass that cupped its hands
over me. Hours glowed to incandescence.
An uneasy world swarmed around us.
Now, only the thought of you (live coals
I blow on) burns distance to a stub.

("Trial 4," 32)

While commenting on the authenticity of experience in his poem, Parthasarathy tells Paniker that he thinks that the sense of void, which follows the traumatic experience of the exile, can be filled in by the experience of love. It helps in establishing relationship with the other; this sense of personal equipoise ... is essential in terms of the wholeness of an individual." The first five poems of "Trial" offer a generalized reflection on the nature, quality, and versatility of the feelings and experiences of love in the past. From the sixth poem on, the persona particularizes his enjoyment of love-ecstasy in very telling images. Thereby, he hopes to know his self with reference to the other, his sweetheart. Being used to sensuous delight, the speaker is driven to equate love with physical intimacy and the excitement it produces. Under the influence of love, the speaker elevates the ritual of sexual love to the status of erotic aesthetics. He makes a mystique of bodily self and its unique pleasures seem strongly to confer a sense of sharp self-identity:
Our bodies scrape home for passions, older than the stones of Konarak.

("Trial 8," 36)

Emphasizing that night alone helps in the achieving of a lucid exclusiveness, the persona seems to visualize a kinship between passion as he participates in and as it got inscribed in sculpture in immemorial antiquity. A backward glance at the thirteenth century erotic sculptures of the Sun temple marks a process in Parthasarathy of a rediscovery of the roots for a perception of the present.

While vision dominates as mode of perception in "Exile" and has mediated between the persona and the environment, touch seems to hold the key to the search for identity in "Trial." Successive descriptions of the enjoyment of bodily pleasures partake of a ritualized aura wherein the mundane is transfigured into something mysterious and cosmic. The individual experiences the stellar world in the body of the beloved. Even though human body is threatened with sudden cessation, the faculty of romantic imagination invests human passion
with a unique glow. It seems to the persona that he
and his beloved are at the gates of Love, on the thre-
shold of the knowledge of the mystery of their identity
through love. The body of the lady love acquires
mystic connotations. It is transhumanized and the
metaphor of the galaxy places it in the vast dimension
of space explored by the persona's telescopic fingers.
But this spatialization is ultimately seen to be the
celebration of something "perishable, trite" (38) because
it overwhelms the flight of human speech.

Yet, by itself, your hand was a galaxy
I could reach, even touch
in the sand with my half-inch telescopic

fingers. Overwhelm the flight
of human speech.

("Trial 10," 38)

The poet's concern is with language, with the
word that eclipses vision of fantasy moving "within
the familiar poles of eye; hand," ("Trial 11," 39).
In the carving out of a sense of identity through love,
the persona of the "Trial" finds romantic metaphors
inadequate. In Whitman's *Song of Myself*, as it has been very well pointed out, the protagonist's passionate sense of identification "supplies the method by which the "I" of the poem is gradually expanded, characterized, and filled with meaning; not until near the end of the poem is the "I" complete—and then it flees." Unlike the cool, collected and introspective beginning of Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage*, Whitman's *Song of Myself* begins in exultation: "I celebrate myself." In fact, the journey of the tramp is depicted in terms of "self-wrestling, inquiry, and wonder—conditional, open, and astonished (not exulting as over an accomplished victory, but gradually revealing, puzzling, discovering.)" After we follow the protagonist's jaunty tramping, we conclude that he was helpless in the beginning and his passage ends up again in a sort of helplessness. Yet there is also ring of confidence in the tone:

A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands; /
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he; /
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, 
out of hopeful green stuff woven. /

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, /
A scented gift and remembrance designedly dropt. /

His "fluid and swallowing soul" makes him painfully aware that

All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, 
it becomes mine. /
I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there. /

("Song of Myself," 78)

The protagonist graduates slowly into a painful realiza-
tion of his own humiliation:

Enough! enough! enough!
Somehow I have been stunn'd. Stand back!

I discover my self on the verge of a usual mistake.

("Song of Myself," 83)

In the same vein, the protagonist of Rough Passage, even as he savours the delight of bodily pleasure, is
aware that human passion is trite and perishable.

It is all by way of recollection that the protagonist relives his love affair in all its original romantic ardour. Every fond enjoyment is likely to end up in disillusionment. What was a source of intense joy now leads the lovers to the "undergrowth of tears and stumble/over the pebbles of eyes,/* "("Trial 11," 39). What was powerful and absorbing is now dead and gone and obtains only as a fossilized past. That is why the protagonist, who has attributed to the organs of sight and touch such elevated functions in order to rhapsodize sensuous joy, now refers to them as "pebbles" and "open grave." ("Trial 11 and 12," 39-40)

Like the protagonist of W.B. Yeats's "Circus Animals' Desertion," the middle-aged protagonist of "Trial" feels that after resurrecting his romantic bliss in various images and symbols, he sees his fingers as the graveyard of lusty feelings. Touch communicates a sense of bodily pleasure, and a "rainbow of touch" ("Trial 1," 29), by stages, reaches its climax in "Trial 10."
Yet, by itself, your hand was a galaxy
I could reach, even touch
in the sand with my half-inch telescopic
fingers.

("Trial 10," 38)

Though some critics have read "Trial" as the protagonist's ecstatic overture to native Tamil culture in terms of erotic relationship between lovers, the weight of the text leans towards an exclusively personal experience of the dramatic speaker. True, the persona is sorely in need of overcoming the stark disillusionment of "whoring/after English gods." ("Exile 2," 15)

By re-rooting himself in the native cultural soil, the persona hopes to overcome the culture shock of an exile. Disappointment in the phase of his exiledom has produced in him a kind of wary outlook, and his approach reflects his tentative attempt to arrive at a satisfying condition of mind:

if I were stopped and cut off.
Were I to clutch at the air,
straw in my extremity,
how should I not scream, 'I haven't finished'? Yet that too would pass unheeded.

("Trial 1," 29)

The intimacy of communion has given way to parting, and parting gives rise to misery and pain as all mortal relationships are fated to. The protagonist's disappointment may also indicate the decadence of his native language and culture in the light of his youthful adoration of his native roots:

We live our lives forever taking leave. Our world, love, moves within the familiar poles of eye, hand, is eclipsed by the word. And words, surely, are no more than ripples in the deep well of the throat.

("Trial 11," 39)

The prospect of loss and death looms large despite the protagonist's will to the contrary. A sense of tragic pathos hangs over him as he turns away from life to contemplate death. He is incapable of living the life
of a cultural emigree in search of a home abroad. Nor can he carry on with abundant zest as a romantic lover. He is just reduced to a helpless state of reverie:

It's you I commemorate tonight.

("Trial 9," 37)

The protagonist revives the past only to contrast it sharply with the present-day dullness and loneliness. All this celebration has not ensured him durable joy. As a poet, Parthasarathy is painfully aware of the inadequacy of language to body forth his inmost experiences and pursuits. The protagonist's self searches, in vain, for a solid object capable of yielding durable peace. The faculties of perception and touch do not provide suitable objective correlatives for the expression of the right emotion:

Our world, love, moves within the familiar poles of eye, hand, is eclipsed by the word. And words, surely, are no more than ripples in the deep well of the throat.

("Trial 11," 39)
The persona even turns away from the fragile tower of books as the study of books has not in any way helped him overcome the pain of his existence as an exile and also as a lover foredoomed to futility and the feebleness of middle age. The anxiety of death takes away or even drains the romantic fantasy of his love. Touch, which opened for him heavenly bliss and eyes, which localized for him the immense treasure of the beauty and charm of his beloved's body, are now degenerated into "open grave" and "pebbles." Despite remarkable powers of his creativity, the poet in the persona feels that he has been polishing the stone and sharpening it to a point.

The groping for a home of reassurance is disrupted by the imminence of death and the burden of the memory of the beloved and of the romantic past. In the future, there is only the prospect of death and the protagonist pays court to it. The speaker lets his mind turn "its fragile door" on the eyes. What promised to be a home fails to be so as his heart cannot bring itself to identify itself in a spirit of accommodation.

... . Other stairs and rails
The idea of the "octopus past" indicates the tentacular roots which the past has cast upon the imagination of the protagonist. In the hobnobbing with death, the fragility of the blurred images of the past becomes evident:

These days I often think of death, and the thought skates on the thin ice of sweat on my forehead.

Curled around me are not the familiar arms, but an octopus past, blurring the plate-glass of my days. Sleep becomes impossible:

hinges which the mind turns its fragile door on, as I hob-and-nob with death.

("Trial 13," 41)
"Trial" traces faithfully in accurate images and succinct symbols the hope of the speaker for arriving at a definitive source of fulfilment of his quest for the discovery of the self. Not being able to relate his questing self to the milieu abroad and at home, he becomes aware of the stark fact of his increased age and his role as a father.

The self cannot by itself come to grips with the world around. The world also has as much influence in moulding the texture of the self and clearly defining its centre of gravity. George T. Wright rightly observes thus:

In a sense, the world, not the poet, writes the poem, just as the world, not the self achieves value at one moment or another. Since value is still inseparable from human selves, however, they must form the principal instances through the articulation of which poems come to be. And the reciprocal process, dramatized in the fact of the poem but also dramatized in the instances of the poem, can be approached from several points of view.
The confession of experience reveals how the world is implicated in it. The persona in "Trial" confesses that he is some sort of a relic of the glorious romantic past, with the present remaining an embarrassing inconvenience. His sense of rootlessness and alienation persists in spite of his zestful recalling of the romantic raptures of love in his youth. That is because his observation of the world reveals not a self implicated in the present but a self enduring the past as it lays its octopus hold upon it:

I confess I am not myself
in the present. I only endure
a reflected existence in the past.

("Trial 15," 43)

In spite of the tone of self-pity and helplessness, the persona's voice rings with the "pronoun courage," a determination to nerve himself to the task of defining with ampler force and sharper clarity the self and the object which sanctifies and legitimizes the quest. He exhibits grit of a rare type in that he again decides to achieve perfection in spite of the knowledge that time has weakened his body and drained it of its vigour:
A routine evening nibbles at, what's left of, that tiresome bait—my forty-five-year-old heart.

Myopic eyes strain to catch every straw in the wind as tomb after tomb explodes. ("Trial 16," 44)

Apart from the significance of romantic love, as detailed in a sequence of occasional lyrics interspersed with autobiographical details and linked by recurrent themes, one of the persistent concerns of Parthasarathy is memories of a complex network of family relations. While in "Homecoming," he explores the possibilities of dravidianizing the English language in the manner of Ramanujan, in "Trial," even while portraying love, Parthasarathy examines, though rather occasionally and implicitly, the question of the adequacy of words for conveying the intensity of feeling:

And words, surely, are no more than ripples in the deep well of the throat. ("Trial 11," 39)
In "Exile," the poet expresses a sense of disillusionment because even after returning home, he finds India no different from the West with its cityscapes and celluloid images prominently displayed. A sense of uprooting and alienation seizes the poet even in his own native land so that he continues his quest for giving quality to the rest of his life. "Trial," which covers approximately a period of fifteen years, attempts to overcome the feelings of exile through love. While some of the images used in "Exile" continue the stress in this section is on the power of feeling or sensation conveyed by the bodily parts. The emphasis on fingers, smell, taste and so on gives the impression of an attempt to achieve oneness. But a sense of fragmentation continues to haunt the experiencing self of the poet.

According to Devy what enriches the poetic quality of "Trial" is Parthasarathy's "double identification with the sensual as well as the intellectual aspects of his personality." On the one hand, in contrast to the union felt in love, the words are "no more than ripples/in the deep well of the throat." ("Trial II," 39) On the other hand, if love is a means of overcoming exile, it is contrasted with an awareness
of death. The theme of love and the theme of death together provide the basic thematic network in this section. While there is an instinctive desire to draw the "sweet water/of your flesh.../with my arms as from a well," ("Trial 9", 37) there is also the realization of the fact that what is celebrated is something so "perishable, trite." ("Trial 10," 38) This is a result of double identification of the poet in terms of which the images of love and death, of glass and stone, are used in the poem, suggesting fragility and permanence. In "Trial 15," there is a reminiscential recognition of an intolerable wrestle with words, an echo of T.S Eliot:

... The tight fist

of my throat reeks of the sweat
of words: their unmentionable
odour sustains me.

("Trial 15," 43)

That the sustaining power of love is uncertain is recognized. From the stone carvings of Konarak, the poet moves on to the image of imperfect stone which his
past has carved out in terms of a literary picture.

From "Trial," there are further advances to make not only
in terms of going beyond "a reflected existence in the
past" but also in terms of "a raid on the inarticulate/
With shabby equipment always deteriorating/In the
general mess of imprecision of feeling."
REFERENCES


8 For instance, Rosaly Puthuceary observes, "As he returns to his beloved Tamil like a weary traveller... The rest of 'Trial'—thirteen sequences in all—sustains this exploration of his growth and his cultural inheritance in images of love. In identifying Tamil with a lover, the poet embodies the relationship with the characteristics accompanying passion." A Study of Rough Passage," The Journal of Indian Writing in English, Special Issue: "Foreign Responses to Indian Writing in English," ed., Kirpal Singh, Vol.8, Nos.1-2, January-July, 1980, pp.16-17.

10. G.N. Devy, "To The End of Marriage: R. Partha-
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