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Thrust and Trend in Vasudeva Reddy's Poetry

Aju Mukhopadhyay

Dr. T. V. Reddy, a senior and once National Professor, was an active educationist working in different positions during his teaching career. A poet in him was always active throughout his career with some spicy prose in fiction and essays. Two things distinctly noticed in Reddy's poetry are regards for India's past thereby valuing its sustaining culture and tradition as well as following the traditional path of rhymes and rhythms in his poetic creation which he likes to call poetic prose. He emerges in most of his poetry as a social being concerned with the fall and happy with the progressive rising trends of standard in human life; specially in Indian context. He is at the same time a realist, romantic, lyricist and naturalist. From some of his poems it seems that he has ample love and appreciation for Nature and sympathy for the have-nots including the ugly bird like crow.

He began writing poems in the eighties of the last century as evidenced from his first book of poems, *When Grief Rains* (1982). He has so far published 8 volumes of poems. *Melting Melodies* (1994) and *Pensive Memories* (2005) were the fourth and fifth among his book of his poems. *Quest for Peace* is the latest volume published in 2013. *Melting Melodies* to *Quest for Peace* covers a period of more than two decades, spanning the larger part of Reddy's creative poetic life. The present essay contains critiques on the three books as mentioned above.

***Melting Melodies* (1994)**

Poems at the beginning of the book present Reddy's socialist self; a sympathiser of the poor and the exploited.

All her sweat insures her a hut
while her toil enthrones the lust.

(The Toiling Woman / *Melodies* 7)

In contrast to Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper" or Tgore's "Krishnakali" there had arisen no romance in poet's heart as he beheld a reaper in the hard days of economic struggle but only sigh of sorrow and sympathy that he poured forth.

is there scarcely a heart
that sighs for your sweat
and feels for your toil? . . .

you reap the crop
heap the harvest
and feed the millions in cities

(The Tiller / *Melodies* 8)

Sorrows of hard working labourers tear his heart;
whose stony foundations
are laid on the streams
or tears and sweat
of skinny skeletons
and wrinkled brows

(Wrinkled Brows/ Melodies 14)

That politics is at the root of all these miseries recurs in his mind from time to time.
 Ever since he became our leader
 Through the solid basis
 of sinful money
 his ideal has been to bury
 our nation's ideals

(Our Leader/ Melodies 11)

And here, at the pinnacle of poet's satire we find a newborn baby undergoing vasectomy
 benefitting an octogenarian teacher and helping boost Government's record for family planning.
 The unwashed child
 with uncut umbilical cord
 at the theatrical table
 at the rural health centre
 undergoes vasectomy
 in the congenial company
 of a skeletal octogenarian
 upholds the teacher's increment
 uplifts the State's record
 The black sky roars
 livid with red triangle
 the earth quakes

(Red Triangle /Melodies15)

And here are some bubbles of love: "Two Plus Two Is Two" (Melodies 21) is a platonic love poem where love from the hearts of lovers are exchanged from some distance. "A Pair of Sparrows" (Melodies 22) depicts pure love for Nature. In "In Memorium-Lines on Rajiv" (Melodies 30) the poet expresses great sorrow at the sudden assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, a Prime Minister of India. He seems to be a great admirer of the slain Prime Minister. "Vernal Love" (Melodies 31) is an offering of pure love to a girl; platonic again.

Written in third person, first person and second person at the same time; the following poem in a humorous vein tells about the eternal truth in a fragile way. We come to and go from the world stage with nothing in hand; leaving the baubles of transient life in the air.

As he is born,
 I entered the stage alone
 and nude without a shred of thread
 As he dies,
 As you quit this coloured cage
 you are sent nude and alone
 assigned to flames or dust . . .
 And in between,
 croak like frogs
 We are swayed by the tides
 of love and hate . . .
 (A Bubble/ Melodies 34)

The idea floats in Indian air; even a tiller knows this truth that finally nothing matters; that life is an empty vessel. All one should be concerned with is the ultimate good of life in relation to the soul; the summum bonum of this variable life would be a look for the beyond, full of divine bliss. The poet tells us this in his rhythmic poetic version; a tale of all tales, as above. He tells that the merit of anything cannot be hidden for long. Of such merits he sings the song of hope that after all, everything cannot be robbed by the smugglers and capturers of life. When all usurpers go, when the meritorious victim too is gone from the scene, one day he rises up. "Out of the embers the spark shines/ and rises the Phoenix from its ashes." (The Merit /Melodies 36)

In "The Coconut Tree" (Melodies 37), "The Cloud" (Melodies 38), "The River" (Melodies 39-40), The Rainbow (Melodies 41) and "To My Father" (Melodies 42) his rambling mind moves showing the particular qualities of each of them in Nature and in relationship with man in life. The poet feels grateful to them while bringing out their respective verities.

I am such and such, the God says, we hear in the Gita and in other scriptures, as uttered by Lord Krishna. In his last poem in this sleek book the poet has sung again the omnipresence of the Lord who is in the heart of every being, who is the essence of things Supreme; telling at last that those who know him are the blessed ones and those who do not, "end up in dust." (The Supreme Lord / Melodies 44)

Poet's philosophical bent of mind is reflected in each observation of this life and life's ingredients telling us about the present that hides the hint about the future. Not only observing objects; humans and non-humans, but commenting on them, the poet takes us with him towards the benevolent ideas with gentle touches. Satiric but he cannot be rude. Despondent sometimes but he cannot be a pessimist.

Punctuation marks are almost absent in all the poems between the first Capital letter and last stop. Poems rhyme sometimes but no rules are followed. Rhyming is part of poetic creation and our poet knows it as it is spontaneous with him. Rhythm is felt almost in every poem.

Pensive Memories (2005)

It seems that the poet became, specially after the unexpected demise of his beloved wife, somehow saddened and subdued in his life. It seems that death often touched his atmosphere. A number of poems in this slender collection, *Pensive Memories*, spread an air of pessimism.

Beginning with "The New Year" (Memories 11) the poet seems uncertain of the future as he came across gloomy days in the recent past but hopes to see bright days ahead. "Can I Sing" ends with questions at the end of each paragraph though the question marks are absent. "Can I see / a clear inward perception / with these myopic eyes / blighted and unlighted / by back-biting and jealousy" (Memories 12)

"Migrating Birds" (Memories 7) is a procession of men and women in great distress, an exodus after a national holocaust; only ribs projected of both men and their cows, weakened to the extreme they walk to a bleak future. "The Dull Evening" (Memories 18) and "A Violent Winter" (Memories 19) present severe climatic conditions. Life is crunched under the oppressive Nature. In "Maya" he writes,

In this meaningless hazy hurried journey;
 In this colossal weird world of stunning Maya
 Fame and shame, sun and shade
 Joy and sorrow lose their odd identity
 And merge in vast colourless vacuum
 All pomp and pride of earthly Maya fade into dust
 The divine Maya mocks at the signatures on water.
 (Maya/ Memories 33)

The gloomy mood continues in “Veil of Death” (Memories 34), “Waiting” (Memories 36), “From Fallow Fields” (Memories 37) and in some other poems. That he painted nature’s fury in this mood is discernible. In “Assembly of Quadrupeds” (Memories 39) he bursts into satiric laughter with enough of humour and sympathy for the poor and gullible people under the present day politicians of our country. The lines are arranged with such dexterity, words are used with such deftness that there remains little difference between this animal conference and any human assembly for the same purpose. It seems that the readers chortle though not publicly.

A vegetarian tiger addressed the assembly . . .
 With wolf as my Premier, progress marches
 Socialism sails and democracy dances
 We assure you free supply of food and shelter
 gas and grass, cheese, ghee and geese,
 liberate you from the yoke of taxation; . . .
 Let us strive unreservedly for a merited society
 free from caste or class, creed or breed or division
 where cows and my tribe, wolves and sheep coexist . . .
 All the members present felt freshly elated
 roared and lowed, barked, brayed and bleated
 (Assembly of Quadrupeds / Memories 39)

In “Pensive Memories” (Memories 55) he opines, “Life is a strange accident or a destined meet / A faceless eerie event or a wondrous feat”. But the question arises why does he paint such dismal scenes or nurtures such gloom?

Though it is not entirely personal, there was a grave cause of personal loss at the sudden demise of his wife which the poet paints in poems after poems. Besides this he finds that the goings on in our society is really dragging us to the dark holes and blind alleys of life. But the scenes and pictures are drawn from life around us with perfect poetic expression; beautiful and attractive. Because of this Nissim Ezekiel, a different type of poet, utters in admiration that “Pensive Memories is a significant contribution to English poetry . . . Like a gifted sculptor he chisels his poems with the deftness of a master craftsman.”¹

The occurrence that afflicts his life, the sudden death of his wife on 27 October 1998, is repeated in some poems with pain and dejection.

Endless is this airy eerie night
 No light in my life nor use of light
 when the light of my heart is put out . . .

(To My Other Half/ Memories 47)

How was their conjugal life?
 O love, your lively loving presence
 Lent my average life rich fragrance
 Filled it with sweet essence of flowers
 I felt gracious God made us for each other
 Though my half, you became my whole self
 You are my God's gift and my breath
 Without you why this journey on the earth?

(To My Other Half/ Memories 49-50)

Finally the poet consoles himself that after his death he will unite with her in the other world as it is the orthodox belief.

my searching soul should unite with yours
 before His Lotus Feet in the world unseen
 from where no one has ever returned
 Ours is the sacred Saptapadi bond eternal
 that unified our hearts with spirit supernal.

(To My Other Half / Memories 51)

This marriage of the bridegroom with the bride circling her seven times ('Saptapadi') with other rituals is according to the traditional Hindu Marriage rites and it is considered that this bond is inseparable in subsequent births as Hindus believe in rebirth. The poet's cry is in tune with the belief but it is not simply the dry faith that he repeats; their relationship was unique in the modern world, an ideal marriage beyond all apprehension.

the life of the light
 the light of my life
 Now without you
 all is dull, dry and dross

(Without You / Memories 31)

In "A Pair of Doves" he gives a picture how two birds in pair lived happily with their little ones but after the loss of the female, "lone and lean without the spark in his eyes; / With Eve's exit, Adam lost his Paradise." (Memories 41)

In "A Lone Bird" he writes, "Alas, he stood alone, a lone bird / waiting for his destined chance / to meet his other half afar" (Memories 23)

Bridal references are here and there. In "The Power of Love" he writes to end the poem, "Lovers may die but not their love; / death may have its sway on all, / but it bows before the Lord of Love." (Memories 35)

This reminds us of the story of Savitri and Satyavan. After the sudden death of Satyavan as destined, Savitri followed his soul to the other world and fought with the Lord of Death, Yama, to return the life of Satyavan. After prolonged arguments Yama agrees to return Satyavan on earth only on the basis of the strength of Savitri's love. This story from Mahabharata has been alluded to by the poet in his "To My Other Half", mentioned earlier. The greatest spiritual epic

on this theme is Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* which is entirely different in its theme and scope offering comparison only in respect of conjugal love.

The river Ganga is worshipped by Hindus as a deity. It is considered as the most sacred river of India purifying everything in this life and beyond. The poet describes its divine link as it flows in "The Ganges Flows": "she purifies mind and body with her alchemic touch, / even bones, ashes and corpses, left in her waters; / Vedic scripts and epics spring from her waters." (Memories 43)

Finally I mention the greatest narrative poem in this volume, titled, "Sabari". Here the poet seems joyous with the nature as in a forest where lives Sabari, a tribal woman ascetic, where visit Ram and Lakshman of the Indian epic "Ramayana", during their search for the abducted Sita. Sabari receives them as Gods and the brothers, accepting her hospitality live a night in her Ashram. There was no hostility between the Aryan brothers and the tribal ascetic as all in harmonious surrounding lived a God like life. Poet's acumen in narrating this episode and his love for Nature is clear here.

It was abound with creepers full of leaves and flowers
which bloomed with lusty touch of tender showers

....

the two Princes Ram and Lakshman, pure and peerless
radiant with divine light, bold and fearless,

...

paced forward sucking Nature's amazing beauty

....

At its entrance with folded hands there stood
sacred Sabari, a woman ascetic, old, feeble and good

...

"O Ram, my life is blessed at your sight sacred

....

Only to see you I postponed my death to this hour with care."

(Sabari /Memories 52-53)

After accepting her invitation to stay the night at her Ashram, having enjoyed her hospitality, the next morning,

In grateful joy Sri Ram, God-incarnate, spoke

"Your kindness drove our fatigue away as we awoke;

Mother . . .

May all your penances guide you to heavenly poise

You are free to choose a sphere celestial of your choice".

The aged Sabari, dazed in joy and supernal ecstasy

wasted not a moment, lit the pyre as in a fantasy

and leapt into it chanting Rama's name filial

as her divine form ascended to the world celestial.

(Sabari / Memories 54)

So it was a case of burning herself, the last rite being chanting of Ram's name, giving no chance to modern cinema directors or writers to earn a new award in presenting another 'Sati', a blemish to Hindu religion and culture. Strangely though, such awardees never named who were the

people who fought and abolished the system, though such system had already been abandoned to remain as one of the rare superstitions, long forgotten in history to draw our attention. This is another aspect of such genuine Sati which never attracted the modern film makers. In ancient India some such pious souls or yogis could leave their body at will by any means including self-immolation peacefully, not like the frenzied lunatic's self-immolation; dying violently for the sake of their political idol.

Nissim Ezekiel was so moved with the poem that he wrote in the foreword, "With its sublimity of spiritual force and diction, graphic description, natural imagery, and enchanting rhythm rises to the epic level and lingers long in the reader's memory." 2

A poet and critic from London, A Russel, wrote about this volume, "We can read the influence of great poetry he has read and they bathe his sensibility in a baptism of transmutation." 3

Poet Vasudeva with his spontaneous capacity to create remains traditional yet modern poet.

Haiku at the end of the book speak of the same trend of his poetry, not written exactly as in the Japanese tradition of such poems like,

Miles of murdered graves
adorned by lip sympathy
legalized by triumphant ballots. (No. 4)

and,

Doctors greedily feel the pulse
only when it swells their purse
stethoscope widens economic scope. (No. 22)

Quest for Peace (2013)

Quest for Peace is a long poem consisting of seven chapters with a total length of 1665 lines. The lines rhyme in different orders; not systematically with the same regular pattern. Rhyming patterns are like ABAB, AABB or ABBA, used in a mixed way. The poet in his preface has explained his scheme of writing this poem divided in seven chapters in regular progression. But there are no such clear divisions between the chapters, nor is a progression found in its sequences. It is neither a story nor an essay. The same idea of corruption, dishonesty and self interest playing their roles mostly in Indian society, specially among the politicians, recur.

The subtitle calls it "A Minor Social Epic". I am not sure about the claim. Real epics are things of the past. There are some literary epics and some are called minor epics. But here is no story, no hero, no progression of events. Here the poet is the hero and the witness at the same time. Whatever may it be called, the credit lies with the poet for writing such a long rhymed poem spreading to 52 pages expressing his ideas in a coherent way throughout the length of the work. It covers mostly the evil and corrupt aspects of the modern society. There are comparisons between the past and the present, between the state of affairs during the colonial period and now. This is a critique of the society. The poem, a lengthy rant, is discussed below with references to its context.

Chapter One

This fabled ancient eastern hilly place
relished once the Lord's supreme grace . . .

(Peace 9)
 now exiled by the metropolitan pell-mell . . .
 It is a metro city of fast sinking ships . . .
 (Peace 12)

This refers to the Himalayan pilgrimage centres which continue to attract large numbers of Hindu pilgrims from the ancient time, lying mostly in the present Uttarakhand State of India covering Chardham or four places of pilgrimage as the poet mentions. There are numbers of such places like Kedarnath, Badrinath, Yamunetri, Gangotri, Haridwar and more. Such places are in the eastern Himalays also. Among the centres in the north only Delhi area, the capital of India, is a metropolitan city. Most others are now urban conglomeration. What did the poet see there?

Drunken bodies lying on the noisy roads
 from dawn to late in the night as toads,
 college campuses full of savage ragging,
 a sport as common as rape and gigging,
 reigning everywhere from remote village
 to the civilized Capital

(Peace 13)

The description as above shows the general condition prevailing in India, as repeated by the poet consecutively.

Chapter Two

From three quotations below it is found that while politicians are at the root of the trouble they represent the people while the situation was not such during the British rule.

Politics is the chosen game of clever guys
 who prefer negative arts and polished lies
 and the crowning act and art of swallowing
 thousands of crores released for nation-building
 (Peace 16)

people of all creeds who lived as loving brothers
 during the White Raj now see with hot daggers
 in their eyes in this cruelly corrupt native Raj
 (Peace 18)

Even to do their routine work and clear a file
 they wait for years till palms are greased in style
 (Peace 25)

Politics is responsible in modern times for its crooked role in bringing down the standard of life of the people as compared to the better ruled British period. Here clerks take bribe and others add fuel to the fire. It strengthens the saying; as the people so the king. King and the people deserve each other. Here politicians and ministers represent the king in a democratic country.

Chapter Three

I wish to renovate my sinking heart
 with the material of my own aesthetic art

along with my old weak ancestral house,
which once my thoughts used to rouse
(Peace 25)

With dependence on the heritage and tradition of India he admits in the following lines that in the prevailing circumstances even the honest and strong are weakened to toe the footprint of the corrupt and succumbs to the same fallen path.

Faith in sheer fear and doubt flies from me . . .
the environment with its spell is strong,
like mighty waves it corrodes the sandy shore,
it dulls our senses, lures us to go wrong;
the boat of my broken will obeys the rising roar.
(Peace 26)

But for all these he finds fault with the politicians as they lead the Yatra.
Ever since we got our independence
air is vitiated with political slogans dense
and we are immunized to this slow poison
(Peace 28)

Sometimes Anna Hazare, a potential upholder of the ethical values, comes as rescuer when only market values are taken into account.

A high pedestal now occupy market values
while in ignoble exile go our moral values.
(Peace 27)

And then the old sin is repeated;
even in our nation's capital woman can't walk . . .
and member of the opposite sex, old or a child,
falls a prey to the beast in man savage and wild
(Peace 30)

And the poet, going a step further, questions the politicians about the efficacy of the rotten and over used reservation system to appease the larger section of the voters for their own benefit.

Do we elect leaders to freeze and banish merit
and reserve positions for the rich and residue?
(Peace 31)

Towards the end of Chapter Three he takes his readers to the international scene, telling that "This new millennium begins on a positive note / a clarion call to crush the cruel tyranny's throat;" (Peace 32) and as example he sites, "The Arab Spring chimes of democratic spirit seem soon to ring / the dictators who ruled for decades feebly fell / . . . the great million march in Cairo at Tahir Square / inspires all as the tragic one at Tiananmen Square, / united voice of the long-suppressed people rises (Peace 32)

I don't know when this was written but it is well known now that both the Arab Spring and Egyptian Uprising dried and fell to ground. New discontent has been brewing up there, people being surrounded by ISIS forces. Under the worst dictator, the Arab killing and seeming uprising

was the result of political manoeuvring by a foreign country. While Tahir Square uprising was in 2011, The Tiananmen Square revolt referred to happened long back, 22 years earlier, in 1989 and was suppressed brutally. All these sporadic revolutions in countries referred to weren't successful though it does not seem to have ended entirely. Time is marching alert.

Chapter Four

Corruption is everywhere, more in God's houses managed by man. So the poet finds, "Travel to Chardham now turns a risky pilgrimage" (Peace 32) and in Tirupati, "Money plays a big role before Lord Venkateswara" (Peace 33). Gasping, the poet tries to escape somehow, "How I wish to have some quiet serene peace, / from this grim unrest eager to find brief release" (Peace 32). His imagination rises to heights,

I wish to fly like a bird from tree to tree
and tour the sky with wide wings fully free
and make an aerial survey of land and sea,
woods and mountains as nature's child
(Peace 34)

But he is soon dismayed, "Our wishes race as rivers in wild flood /without a realized body with hot blood." (Peace 36) His ears are always rung with news of corruption in Indian society and he mentions them often and on in all chapters of the book. "For corruption most fertile is Indian soil, / the weed has full growth without toil, /our 'bribescape' is as vast as skyscape (38-39).

The poet has narrated nicely the corrupt state of India in his satiric conception.

Chapter Five

In today's India he finds the middle class suffering the most for he is usually neither privileged with a gift of reserved quota round his neck nor is endowed with plenitude. He "tries untiringly to boost his material image /on his relatively still hot youthful page" (Peace 40). From childhood education to leisure time, everything was better in his former years. But teachers and teaching methods have radically changed. "Gone are those olden days and golden ways;" (Peace 42) so now "Leisure fills my eyes with hours of T.V. trash . . . /show all debased horrors /that deserve to burn in flames into dirty ash" (Peace 43). And the frustrated poet, "In confusion and blues I drink iced coke /determined not to mind other's hot joke (Peace 41).

Chapter Six

Teachers' crime overflows to the next chapter. "can there be greater sin or crime or shock/ than teacher's misdirecting a tender flock?" (Peace 44) He questions. Upstarts do not satisfy him. He is a traditionalist. He believes, justifiably, "without roots human plants can't bloom." (Peace 49) In this deceitful hollow age the poet vows to remain the same, "Let me remain my simple self till I die." (Peace 50) The age is not peaceful, everything is in rage, fuming; he writes, "The Ganges roars in floods, fumes and flames . . . /Lord Siva atop the snowy peak raves and rages / in His Sivathandava the dance that blazes." (Peace 50)

Chapter seven

The rants about corruption and overall destructive moves by man, whether in the East or the West, continue. He utterly condemns the destruction of Bamiyan Buddha, the image of the saint, in Afghanistan by the barbaric people or the terrorist attack on the epistle of Peace, Lord Buddha,

at his point of realization, the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, India, telling that virtually the whole world is burning under terror operation, aggression and suppression. Under the circumstances he seems to be very eager to achieve Peace by any means. Admitting that while crows and sparrows are in peace only man suffers under cloud of explosive fear he says that we Indians suffer for our poisonous inheritance from the middle ages, thereby losing our original inheritance from the earlier Vedic time leading to the time of the Upanishads. Wishing and praying intensely for peace doubt assails him to the last compelling him to question, “In search of peace a wild goose chase?” (Peace 50)- asking, can there be peace “when all the green boughs are cruelly cut / and natural avenues for harmony are shut?” (Peace 59) He comes to an answer like, “Fate of peace is like a mad man’s dress in rags” (Peace 56) for he knows that all shallow acts and wishes like bathing in Ganges will never take away the sin of desires and vices from man. The poet feels that however much we pray and make vows, enough of which he does, peace will remain ever elusive. Out of the teaching of Buddha and other Indian sages, a wisdom is filtered touching him,

one who is content and has peace of mind
in joyous feast and hunger, mirth and death
is the real conqueror of this world blind,
true possessor of all the land and wealth
(Peace 51)

Wishing to remain simple and faithful while loving his Motherland the poet, inheriting the vision of the sage and seer Sri Aurobindo, asserts his ultimate hope that,
“This life is the supreme gift of the One Supreme
to bloom into life divine, not to fade as a bad dream”
(Peace 60)

Written in clean and clear language, full of humour, satire and imagery, the long piece in quest for peace is expected to satisfy the heart of most of the contemporary peace loving people due to an affinity of thought and experience. Beginning with doubt it ends in hope.

T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* ends with three Sanskrit words, “Shantih Shantih Shantih”. 4

T. V. Reddy also ends his poem with similar words, spelt little differently as it is usually done, maybe as pronounced in South India, “Ohm Santhi! Santhi!! Santhi!!!” (Peace 60)

So let us also end the piece invoking peace; Om Peace Peace Peace!

one thing is clear by the chain of poems garlanding the three books from cover to cover that the learned poet deeply reveres the ancient tradition of India giving due respect to the time when we were ruled by the foreigners also. But his nerve fails at the present state of affairs in India which is the worst phase as compared to any other earlier phases, morally and ethically, though the country has progressed in science and technology in tune with the modern trend worldwide. It is beyond his tolerance so he has resorted to writing rants in lieu of his traditional poems written earlier as in the two books cited. But having a positive trend of mind he believes that all this turmoil shall be over and that peace will be restored.

Notes:

1. Professor Nissim Ezekiel. Foreword. *Pensive Memories* 8
2. Ezekiel. Foreword. *Memories* 7

3. Critical Opinions. Memories 62

4. Eliot T. S. *The Waste Land*. Chennai: Oxford University Press. 1999. Ninth impression. Paperback

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