



POETRY AND THE FORM

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ABSTRACT

Formalism is a mode of critical enquiry which investigates literature against its form. It concerns only about the significance of form. Poetry is a genre, form of which plays a crucial role in conveying the theme. Hence this paper is an attempt to relate formalism and poetry. Poetic forms are distinct to each literature and language. This would illustrate the importance of form in poetry in a comparative perspective. This would throw light upon the relationship between Tamil and English poetic forms.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to elucidate the relationship between poetry and formalism. It also attempts to demonstrate the formalist application to poetry. This approaches two poems from a formalistic perspective. The poems are discussed without authorial, historical, social and literary background. M.H.Abrams views formalism, “as a specialised use of language, and proposes a fundamental opposition between literary use of language and the ordinary “practical” use of language” (M.H. Abrams, 75).

Two poems, one from English literature and one from Tamil literature, have been chosen for the study. This article examines the advantages and disadvantages of formalistic approach. The similarities and dissimilarities in making the persuasive use of language in literature in the East and the West are brought out. The paper helps to enhance the total understanding of formalism in appreciating poetry.

The English poem is given below followed by the analysis.

*Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards
However we follow the printed directions of sex*

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*However the family is photographed under the flag-staff -
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.*

*Beneath it all, the desire for oblivion runs:
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
The costly aversion of the eyes away from death -
Beneath it all, the desire for oblivion runs. (Greene, 125)*

There are two stanzas consisting five -lines in each. It is shortened in form but stuffed with meaning. The desire for loneliness and death is the dominant theme of the poem. The first and the last lines of the first stanza are same and form the central theme of the poem. The phrase “Beyond all this, the wish to be alone” (Greene, 125). gives vibes that the persona wants to die in spite of the earthly pleasure. As in the first stanza, so in the second stanza also “Beneath it all, the desire for oblivion runs” (Greene, 125) is opening as well the ending line. The repetition of the phrases is used effectively in order to reinforce the idea.

The idea of “rejecting all social activities” is epitomized by the utterance “wish to be alone.” The idea evolves in the phrase “desire for oblivion runs”. First the speaker wishes loneliness and next he wishes to die. There is a harmony in the evolution of thought. The thought of the first stanza finds its completeness in the second stanza. The word “oblivion” has a touch of euphemism as it refers to death.

The “artful tensions of the calendar” gives the idea to reader that man is always busy with his calendar schedule. This prevents him from realising squarely the inevitability of death. The word “artful” is the artistic selection of the poet.

The repetitive use of the word “however” strikes the idea that inspite of all the pleasures the persona has in the earth he wants loneliness. The words “beyond” and “beneath” are not tantamount in their linguistic meaning or in “ordinary usage.” The two words are stretched together in their literary usage. This shows the differences between “ordinary usage” and “poetic usage.” The word “aversion” in the ninth line signifies dislike. Persona uses the word in a different sense. Typically the word means a dislike for something but here the persona has derived it from the idiomatic expression to “avert one’s eyes”, meaning to turn ones eye away from something one should not see. So, at first “aversion” seems to imply a dislike for death. But in terms of averting one’s eyes, it would mean that they force themselves to look away from death when they actually do have a death wish. The word “costly” adds significance to the line. Aversion cannot be costly. persona implies that there is a great loss in refusing to recongnise the death wish.



Thus, this poem can be discussed in isolation applying formalism. The form of the poem alone gains currency here. The poet, his background, and the age are completely ignored. Application of this approach in Tamil literature is discussed blow with a trial with a Tamil poem.

*Arivai virivu sei! Aganda maaku!
Visalap paarvaiyal vilungu makkalai!
Anaithu kol unnai sangamamaaku!
Maanida samuthiram naanenru koovu!
Pirivilai engum betha millai
Ulagam unnaun udutha uduppai!
udamai makkaluku pothu
Puviyai nadathu pothuvil nadathu
Vaanaippol makkalai thaavum
Vellai anbal ithanai
Kulla manithartkkum koorada tholane! (Bharathidasan, 154).*

The central idea of the poem suggests that the world is meant for human. The persona wants the human to widen his knowledge and make the world as a unique place for human community. The persona used the language economically.

The parlance is not the “ordinary language” but the “poetic language.” The rhyme schemes and meters are irregular. The poet does not use any dialect forms. The phrasology though it is poetic it is simple and direct. The poet uses alliteration well: “Aruvai virivu sei! Aganda maaku” and “Ulagam unnaun udutha uduppai” are some examples.

The grammatical patterns are used very well. Nowhere the poet uses any connotation. Each sentence gives a complete meaning. The persona uses imagery. He imagines human world as “samuthiram” (ocean). The poem is very simple that the meaning can be grasped in the first reading itself.

Having discussed about two poems, the offprint proceeds to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. The similarities and dissimilarities in making the potent usage of language in both the literatures, the total understanding of this approach as well as literary forms and the conclusion follows.

The advantages and disadvantages is first subject to be discussed here. The readers are brought so close to the poems through this approach. Only the poems and the readers are



there, having left all other details. This enables the reader to interact with the text and draw as many as possible meanings. Moreover this approach shows how language could be used effectively in poetic discourse. This also delineates the “poetic language” from “ordinary language.”

Of course, there are some disadvantages in this approach. The first poem talks about the desires of the persona for loneliness and to die that too deprived of all earthly pleasures. What made the persona to think so is not clear unless reader gets to know the authorial details and background of the poem. By the same token in the Tamil poem the persona wants his fellow human to attain scholarship and to be united. There also it is not clear what made the author to write such a poem. The social background of the poet’s era is prerequisite to understand the works completely.

The reader could very well comprehend the meaning as well distinction between “poetic language”, and “ordinary language”. The reader may not be able to understand why the purpose of poems . This approach deals with literature in isolation, makes literature to stand on its own, and claims that literature is for its own. Application of this approach reflects life of a work of art but fails to reflect life through the work of art. Literature cannot stand for its self; it is expected to have some moral and social purpose.

The similarities and dissimilarities between two literatures in using the language effectively are discussed here. Both the poets strike to the economy of words. Both the do not follow regular rhyme scheme, structure and meter. There is euphony in development of thought of both the personas.

In English each single word has multipurpose. This is clear from the example of “aversion.” In Tamil there are multi-words to convey a single idea. This is clear from the word “agandam” which means completeness. The synonymous of the word “mulumai” is used for ordinary purpose. English writers choose an ordinary word and they polish it with the imbibed meaning but Tamil uses polished words. This differentiation in the usage of language leads to “denotation” and “connotation.”

English words are chosen and they are loaded with the meanings by the author. Hence it is difficult for the reader to understand the text. What Jacobson calls “literariness” makes a verbal message into a work of art. This conversion leads to connotation. The reader struggles to comprehend the authorial meaning. This is distinct from the above example.

In Tamil the case is entirely different. The literal meaning and the literary meaning are already classified by the linguists. It is the work of the author to choose the pattern which he



requires. Therefore a reader has to differentiate between both the sets of verbal patterns to have a proper understanding of literature. Since, the differentiation is already done; there will not be many connotative meanings.

Thus formalism can be applied to any literature in proximity of time, space and distance. The paper analysed the formalistic approach in two literatures. This may help the readers to enhance the understanding of formalism as well the “poetic language”.

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