



Reconnecting with the Sublime: The Poetry of Vijay Kumar Roy

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This paper is a critical discussion of the poetry of Vijay Kumar Roy, particularly that which is presented in his recent book, *Realm of Beauty and Truth: A Collection of Poems* (2016). These poems are like a cry from the wilderness, or perhaps the Wasteland, that is, the decadent, secular, consumerist orientated global village we live in at the start of the 21st century. One main feature of Roy's poetry is that he does not just complain about or describe how bad and unhappy the contemporary world is, in a rather gentle way he juxtaposes opposites. For example, he may alert us to an aspect of environmental destruction but in the same poem celebrates the beauty and delicate balance of nature as it once was. The first poem in this book is a good example:

*The old oaks, banyans and pines
Stretch their hands and surround me
To tell ancient stories of sages and saints.*

*The innocent foothills along with trees
Wounded by machines and mortals
Pave serpentine ways
And lament the development at the cost of environment.*

("In the Lap of My Mother", Lines 6 - 12)

Roy is not, strictly speaking, only a nature poet, however, he recognises and celebrates through his poetry the spiritual connectedness we all have, or at least once had, with nature. A convenient way to classify Roy's poetry would be to call it spiritual and humanitarian poetry. He sees modern humans in their greed and avarice as commodifying everything and having lost touch with the spiritual aspects of existence, an aspect essential to nurture for a balanced and fulfilling life.

Many of Roy's poems, especially those that are immersed in the beauty of nature, are reminiscent of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry. That is, they not only describe nature, but bring it to life on the page so to speak. Poems which express animistic themes have a deep respect for the natural world and see it as having a *bona fide* life of its own - not just existing to be used and exploited by humans. In the above poem ("In the Lap of My Mother") shades of mystical experience are present, "as the trees reach out and surround the poet." Also Roy honours their animistic nature when they "lament" and are "wounded", just like feeling, sensitive sentient creatures. Further we see how old trees (implying wisdom) "...tell ancient stories of sages and saints."

It is important to note that prior to the rise to dominance of the Christian religion specifically, most societies had a deep respect for nature and lived harmoniously with her. The



deliberate, pernicious misinterpretation of the Christian doctrine that God put the animals and plants here for human exploitation instead of "giving us stewardship over the earth", a very different approach indeed, is partly responsible for the present state of global environmental exploitation and destruction. (White 1967)

The irony is that many of Roy's poems are highly spiritual and talk of the Divine and His sovereignty, "A Pious Pursuit" for example, and it is the actual misinterpretation of various scriptures that have caused the problems with nature that Roy has to write about in a visionary attempt to correct them. I am not suggesting that Roy's poems are underpinned by Christianity, far from it, his religious and spiritual references are very much from Indian mythology, Hinduism and very ancient belief systems. However, India like all other countries has been caught up in the insidious Western global capitalist approach to commodification of everything, as mentioned this is arguably connected with the misinterpretation of Christian scripture. Consequently India is experiencing pollution and environmental destruction on a huge scale, this I have noticed is the concern of many other Indian-English language poets as well. Roy's almost devotional poem, "A Pious Pursuit", which I quote in full below is a wonderful example of how he combines the subtle importance of nature with the mystical reunion with the Divine.

*The blowing of winds, trembling of leaves,
Waves of water, chirping of birds,
Movements of innocent babes and beasts,
Beauty of flowers and moonlit nights, and
Existence of the living and non-living entities
Are eternal educators
And the messengers of Eternity.
They lead us to the pious pursuit
Of the mysteries of Nature
And divine knowledge.
That kingdom of Delight
Entails our surrender
To His lotus feet
Without attaching to our acts
And approaching our Master
Who keeps on waiting
To welcome us in His sovereignty
Where successful entry
Can reserve an eternal seat
Close to His splendid throne
And liberate us from the bond of rebirth. (1-21)*

Although there are similarities in Roy's poetry to that of the mystical poets, such as John Donne, and to the nature-romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Keats, Roy is very much a contemporary poet. This is especially clear in his poems which lament the destruction of the environment, the vulgar unbridled greed of unregulated capitalism, and the loss of spiritual values. Wordsworth for



example did not have to contend with, nor write about the wholesale destruction of nature because it was not a monumental contemporary issue for him as it is for us. I think here about famous Australian poets such as Dorothea Mackellar and Banjo Patterson, how they described the beauty of the vast and varied continent of Australia, warts and all, but largely the way the Divine or The Ancestor Spirits intended it.

However, things have changed, many contemporary poets are becoming more and more orientated towards activism as the global environmental destruction accelerates at an alarming rate. These poets, such as Roy no longer have the luxury of simply honouring nature in their verse, their mission is urgent and essential. Extraordinary indigenous Australian poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) was an early Australian activist poet, below some lines from her poem "We Are Going" (1964) (Noonuccal, 1964) - an ocean and continent apart but similar feelings expressed as with Roy.

*The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going. (Lines 21 – 25)*

I believe one of the highest ideals or services poetry can offer to the general population, which most poets hope will read their work, is to tackle the big questions, articulate that which the non-poet would like to say themselves, and through their poetry help make a positive difference to the Quality of Life of all people. Most of Roy's poetry expresses these ideals. A few poems towards the middle of the book are of a very personal nature, these contrast considerably with the more visionary, "big picture" poems of the rest of the book.

Having said this, even these personal poems still express gratitude to the Divine, and appreciation of genuine love – of another human or God. As mentioned Roy's poetry is both imbued with spirituality and humanitarianism. We see this in the poem, "The Garden":

*Reaching a garden in memoriam
I feel as a blessed in Elysium
Not less than a mythological deity
Forgetting all except this reality. (Lines 1 – 4)*

And then with the poem "My Eldest Sister" we experience the love of and caring of another human, it is a beautiful poem so will quote in full:

*The abandoned well behind my courtyard
Reminds me my caught hold hand,
Pouring of cold water and rubbing Lifebuoy
And begetting childhood sob every morning;*



*Receiving chapattis and milk
With a chide, to eat the whole,
Making me ready to school
Handing over books, notebooks, pen and a gunny-sack;*

*Kindling lantern every evening
Making me recite Sanskrit couplets, Hindi poems
And English word-meanings
Ensued from her stringency.*

*Being so much loved and
Often accompanied to her in-law's home
Enlivens those days of cheers
Unrepeatable in life.*

*Her sudden demise shook my conscience
And the flood of tears ruined all crops of affection
But those unforgettable moments of motherly love
And caring hands will edify the essence of my life forever.(Lines 1 -20)*

Roy's poems are characterised by the use of simple language, we do not need to consult a dictionary to understand what he means. This suits the themes and subject matter of his poems very well. There is one exception and that is when he uses the specifically Indian names of deities, places and temples for example. Fortunately in most cases he provides footnotes, some quite extensive, which explain such words, this is an important inclusion and consideration for non-Indian readers who may not be familiar with for example, the Ramayana (great Hindu epic) or Vrindavan (an Indian village). I included a Glossary at the end of my own recent book of poetry as many of my words are very contemporary and not even in the current dictionaries.

Roy creates vivid imagery within his poems for example in "Eternal Game":

*That garden of bliss
Has only flowers
Of all hues and pleasant odours
To welcome those
Whose lives are lived
Not for themselves
But for those
Whose arms do not work
Legs do not walk.(Lines 4 -12)*

He does not often use metaphor or simile in his poems, preferring the direct, clear approach, though quite often he uses repetition of words to create a more powerful insistent impression. I



think this is an important feature of good poetry and can often add to the poems cadence, in the last line of “The Consequences” for example: “And the bell tolls, tolls and tolls in her ears.”(Line 20) And then in the following lines from the same poem we experience a sweet cadence that rolls off the tongue easily.

*Pleasing and pleasure have become the ultimate goal
And His paved path been misused and abused. (Lines 15 – 16)*

Vijay Kumar Roy is a well-established academic, writer and educator. He teaches English language and literature, supervises Doctoral students, and is editor-in-chief of *ArsArtium*, An International Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. He is a member of numerous scholarly organisations, has published sixteen books, including poetry and English language teaching. He has also published a large number of book reviews and research papers in international journals.

I have included the abovevery brief précis of Dr. Roy’s professional activities not only to give a background but also to indicate that Roy is a very serious and committed teacher and is deeply connected with the Indian tertiary education system. Why is this important? As we shall see, if I may paraphrase Shakespeare, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark [India].” There are at least five poems in *Realm of Beauty and Truth* which are specifically concerned with education: “Learning”; “Education is a Mission”; “Modern Education”; “Modern Temples of Learning”; and “Dreamy Factories”.

The first two poems mentioned above rejoice in the opportunities education offers;

*Learning engenders an innovative spirit
And directs us to swallow and digest
The great epics and the World’s Classics
To see the world through the eyes
Of spiritual masters both ancient and modern.
(“Learning”, Lines 1 – 5)*

Roy, I think we can safely say, has a dedicated passion for good education, further on in this poem “To sit and drink/The milk of all mystery.” Then in “Education is a Mission” we experience similar feelings;

*Education has to pave the way to attain self-realization
To embrace the Light and eliminate the Darkness
To strengthen the perpetual divine perception*



*And enlighten the hungry souls on the path of truth,
(Lines 10 – 13)*

Clearly in these poems, as in his nature and humanitarian poems, spirituality and rising above our base material existence is of the utmost importance. This is the reason that the three following poems needed to be written. Roy came to realise in some institutions greed and avarice, and teachers “engaged in wrong deeds” were far more prevalent than he thought possible. In a footnote to “Modern Education” he expresses his dislike of, “...the academic evils prevailed[ing] in modern society.” From this poem:

*But they did not conquer the evils
Where fraternity lacks love
Prosperity lacks peace
Knowledge lacks wisdom (Lines 9 – 12)*

Things get much worse in “Modern Temples of Learning” and “Dreamy Factories”. These poems are of such importance, in my opinion, that I will quote the former in full:

*Enthralled by lust of money and power
Unique bids arise day by day
To create new degree mills
And offer degrees and diplomas*

*With attractive nomenclatures.
Sale and purchase
Alluring and cheating
And entangling in a lasting mesh*

*Strengthen the fervour of this profession.
The business of extracting fee and capitation
And converting the amassed black money into white
Have become a passion and pride.*

*Wealth and influences get victory over the latent talents,
The initiatives of white kurta and pyjamas
Merge in decent coat and tie
To flourish the modern temples of learning. (Lines 1 – 16)*

This is what I mean when I say great poetry goes way beyond personal concerns. This poem hints at the situation in many countries not just India, and concerns the global importance of good, honest education. The background footnote to this poem is as powerful as the poem itself, it expresses how deeply this “rottenness” upsets Roy, and why it is important to, in a sense put his reputation and career on the line, because he is an “existentially authentic” human being.



I stated earlier that Roy is not totally a nature poet, that is, he does not only write poems about the natural world, nor is he totally a mystical poet. Having said this, quite a number of his poems are very close to being “mystical nature poems” in the traditional sense. For Roy nature cleanses the soul of a person from the build-up of man-made psychological toxins, opens the gateway to the Divine, and allows the genuine sensitive observer to experience the Infinite. In the poem “Ethiopia” we feel an odd tension between “the distressed immigrant” and the uplifting that nature brings.

*Over ridden by beautiful hills, trees and bushes;
Cascades, chirping of colourful tiny birds and
Roaming of clouds close to trees charm one’s soul
And imagination wanders to enter the realm of Infinite.
Scattered cottages amid the attributes of nature,
The sunshine and drizzling on dancing thickets
Console the distressed immigrant
And open the gate of gaiety. (Lines 5 – 12)*

In the poem, “On First Looking of Keki N Daruwalla” Roy explores beauty as Keki is “lost in Keats’s fancy.” The first section of the poem sets the scene so to speak for this adulation of nature and the Divine.

*God creates one for another
Songs and myths teach us so;
It happened with Daruwalla
Who served India as a cop and became a poet
I saw him on the dais, as a blithe spirit
Lost in Keats’s Fancy.
His speech made all soar
On the wings of verse
And to descend in the world of ecstasy.
An aspiring poet questioned him:
“Why is affection the mother of verses?”
“There’s nothing except this.” Quoth he. (Lines 9 – 12)*

*Lads and lasses and the masses
Began dreaming of a Utopian world
Prattling ecstatically hand in hand.
Age cannot wither beauteous hearts
Once it is housed, it never parts.
Beauty is their Alma Mater
For beauty their every part. (Lines 13 – 19)*



I find it is fitting to end this paper with this amazing poem as it in a sense combines the three main elements of Roy's work: spiritual (re)connection with the Divine; Nature; and Mystical (re)union with nature and the Divine. These three elements are fast disappearing from our global society, which without them is becoming a soulless commercial, commodified Wasteland. At least there are some individuals who are concerned about this disintegration and in their own way, such as with Roy's poetic offerings, have consciously set out to help make changes for the better, and for all human beings.

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(This paper first published in, The Social, Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Modern Indian Poetry in English. (ed.) Vijay Kumar Roy. 2017 Cambridge Scholars Publishing)