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**CULTURAL CONCERNS IN RAJAGOPAL  
PARTHASARATHY'S ROUGH PASSAGE**

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# Cultural Concerns in Rajagopal Parthasarathy's Rough Passage

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**Abstract – Cross cultural concerns became a significant ingredient of modern literature with the rise of modernist movement after the First World War. Crossing the cultural borders involves conflict and also leads to transition in a country's culture. R. Parthasarathy's contribution to English poetry is remarkable and unforgettable. He tries to create the lost order of society and culture. This impulse to preserve his culture is at the bottom of his best known work Rough Passage. The present paper intends to explore the traumatic cultural conflict through some of his poems from the Rough Passage. In the words of M.K. Naik, "R. Parthasarathy is a poet acutely conscious of the complex relationship between the hour glass of the Tamil mind and the exact chronometer of Europe." The poet attempts to reconcile between the Tamil past and the impotence felt in acquiring a foreign language.**

**Keywords: Conflict, Cross Cultural, English Poetry, Language, Parthasarathy.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Cross cultural concerns became a significant ingredient of modern literature with the rise of modernist movement after the First World War. Crossing the cultural borders involves conflict and also leads to transition in a country's culture. R. Parthasarathy's contribution to English poetry is remarkable, uncountable and unforgettable. He gave a new thought and a new outlook to Indian English poetry. Rajagopal Parthasarathy was born at Tirupparaiturai near Tiruchirappalli in 1934. He spent his childhood in the temple town of Srirangam. After completing an M.A. in English from Bombay University, he went to England to study at Leeds University. The experience of living away from his motherland and mother tongue became an inseparable element of his poetry. Parthasarathy, a bilingual poet, writing both in English and Tamil, always experienced an acute conflict between his resolve to write in Tamil and his inability to give up writing in English. As a poet he did not compose many poems. Parthasarathy's works include *Poetry from Leeds* (1968, edited in collaboration with another scholar), *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets* (1976, edited collection of poems) and an original work entitled *Rough Passage* (1977). In the poems of *Rough Passage* Parthasarathy dwells upon the question of language and identity, and upon the inner conflict which arises from his being brought up in two opposite cultures.

His sense of belonging is always shattered by the conflict between past memories and the present

reality. *Rough Passage* is divided into three parts, "Exile", "Trial", and "Homecoming", each of which is again divided into several sections. The three-part structure of the poem, which suggests the loss and recovery of a colonized self, is repeated in the individual poems... Displacement, guilt, loss of language and identity, anxiety and schizophrenia are some of the recurrent themes in *Rough Passage* (Kumar et al., 2012).

As an Indian writer in English language he felt alienated from the English language as well as from his own culture. On his return from England after a long stay, he declared that he would write only in Tamil language. He yet could not help writing in English. Naik (2009) in his book *A History of Indian English Literature* rightly points out

R. Parthasarathy is a poet actually conscious of the complex relationship between "the hour glass of the Tamil mind" and "the exact chronometer of Europe". "There is something to be said for exile", he declares, "you learn roots are deep." He began as a young and hopeful poet "hyper-critical of everything Indian" and convinced that "England would be my future home. And the English language will help me to belong there"-a hope shattered by his sojourn in England. He returned with "a new understanding of myself and India". The pendulum then swung to the other extreme. He thought that his "prolonged and tempestuous" affair with the English language was over and that he had "settled down with Tamil".

Fortunately, he returned to his first love (namely the English language) and published *Rough Passage*.

In 'Exile' he analyses his solitary condition in England and his weakened bond with Tamil culture. He recognizes that the new environment can change the past and alienate a self from his own culture. Walking through the streets of Calcutta, he writes

You smell of gin  
and cigarette ash. Your breasts,  
sharp with desire, hurt my feelings. (poem no. 8, Exile)

He finds that the years have given him little wisdom even though he has attained the age of thirty. He further laments

The ashes are all that's left  
of the flesh and brightness of youth. (poem no. 8, Exile)

He also finds England

lanes full of smoke and litter  
with puddles of unwashed  
English children. (Exile 2)

The first part, entitled "Exile", opposes the culture of Europe with that of India, and examines the consequences of British rule on an Indian, especially the loss of identity with his own culture and therefore the need for roots. Again the turmoil of non-relationship personal love holds forth the promise of belonging, and the second part 'Trail' celebrates love as a reality here and now 'Homecoming', the third and final part of *Rough Passage* explores the phenomenon of returning to one's home (Parthasarathy, 1976).

Britisher's arrogance towards Indians also offends his sensibility. On returning to India, he feels that he has acquired command over English language but has lost much of his native identity.

School was a pretty kettle of fish:  
the spoonfuls of English  
brew never quite slaked your thirst. (poem no. 2 in Trial)

After exile and trial the poet explores his experience of returning back to his motherland and mother tongue. He feels hungry for his own native language, Tamil. But he finds that Tamil is now a "tired language". He finds his mother tongue "hooked on celluloid".

My tongue in English chains

I return after a generation, to you

I am at the end... (Homecoming 1)

He finds himself a misfit and begins his quest for an identity and goes about looking for it everywhere. But he finds the environment to be hostile to him and his quest. Eventually he comes to the conclusion that he has lost the battle of life and

have exchanged the world,  
for a table and chair. (Homecoming 10)

He further feels that he has lost his identity altogether and is no longer himself. He even discovers ironically that "went for wrong gods from the start". He admits, "Even though I am Tamil speaking, yet write in English, there is the overwhelming difficulty of using images in a linguistic tradition that is quite other than that of my own" (Parthasarathy, 1980). He tries to create a balance between the English language and the Tamil culture. He understands the need to change his thought process and makes his return.

Turn inward. Scrape the bottom of your past.

Ransack the cupboard  
for skeletons of your Brahmin childhood  
(Homecoming 2)

One of the most striking conceptions of R Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* is emotional and spiritual dilemma caused in the poet's mind as a result of being educated in a foreign language and poetry. The poet feels that he has become a stranger to the traditions of Tamil culture and has thus lost his roots. The poet attempts to reconcile between the Tamil past and the impotence felt in acquiring a foreign language (Dhawan, 1994).

Hereafter, I should be content,

I think, to go through life

with the small change of uncertainties.  
(Homecoming 14)

The emotional and spiritual dilemma is clearly revealed throughout the poem *Rough Passage*. He suffers from the sense of rootlessness and urges for belongingness. However, in the last part of *Rough Passage* he realizes that *one can never be "at home" anywhere and there is no primal wholeness to which one can return*. Thus the cross cultural concerns in *Rough Passage* leads to a dilemma in the poet's mind.

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