

Paradox as a Tool for Deconstruction : A Critical Study of the Selected

Poems of Abdul Rahman's *Pithan*

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Abstract:

Paradox is a major literary device used by the poets to create feelings of intrigue and curiosity in readers' minds, to make them think deeper and harder so that they are convinced of certain ideas, which are contrary to accepted beliefs and opinions. The paper attempts to study the use of paradox in Abdul Rahman's *Pithan*. It is a collection of 37 poems written in Tamil. These poems use paradox predominantly as a literary technique to deconstruct the preconceived notions and established ideas associated with different aspects of human life in order to offer newer perspectives and more meaningful insights about them to the readers.

Keywords: paradox, contraries, opposites. deconstruction, illogical

Paradox as a literary device has its own importance in artistic representations. In the words of M.H Abrams, it is a, "statement that seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes sense" (267). A paradox is a self-

contradictory statement or a statement which brings together opposite ideas, which however conveys some essential truth. It is highly intellectual in tone. In simple terms, it is a statement contrary to accepted opinion, existing beliefs and perceived opinion. In this way it may be apparently absurd and fantastic, but a little reflection shows that it is essentially true. The writers often use this literary device to startle and surprise the readers in order to grab their attention. They want their readers to think and by which they want to drive home the truths they want to convey

As mentioned earlier, paradox is an expression of the intellect and the witty. One naturally thinks it will not have place in poetry, which is the language of the soul—an expression of imagination and emotion. However this idea is contested by Cleanth Brooks, a New critic who in his essay “The Language of Paradox” says that, “our prejudices force us to ‘regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational. Yet there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry (Brooks, 1). He talks about the use of paradox as an effective literary device in the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Alexander Pope, John Donne and others in his essay to establish that, “the language of paradox is the language of poetry” (Brooks, 1)

The paper attempts to study the use of paradox in the select poems of Abdul Rahman’s poetry collection *Pithan*. It is a Tamil poetry collection consisting of 37 poems, which are written about the different domains of human knowledge. It was published in the year 1998. The work is interesting as it employs paradox as a major literary device to deconstruct the established and conventional ideas of the society in order to give a newer perspective towards life. The work has not been translated into English. The researcher has selected four poems namely Puthaham”,

“Arikkai”, “Urakkam” and “Pasi” from the collection for his study purpose and has translated himself the poems and poetical stanzas which are used in the paper.

Abdul Rahman((1937 – 2017) was a Tamil Poet from Tamil Nadu, India. He is popularly known by the title *KAVIKO*, which is translated as Emperor among poets. Having served as a professor of Tamil for 29 years at Islamiah College, Vaniyambadi, Rahman was also part of the *Vanambadi* literary movement, which promoted budding writers and poets. Rahman held various positions such as the chairman of the Wakf board of Tamil Nadu and a member of the Tamil Language Promotion Board of the Central Institute of Classical Tamil. He was a recipient of numerous awards like Kalaignar award (1997), Kalaimamani award (1989), Bharathidasan award (1989), Sahitya Akademi Award, Kamban Kazhagam's Kambar award (2007) and Umaru Pulavar award (2008). His works are deeply inspired by the writings of Moulana Jalaludeen Rumi, Iqbal, Tagore and Khalil Jibran. His scholarship reveals in his proficiency in many languages like Tamil, English, Arabic, Urdu, Parsi and Hindi. His first poetry collection is *Paalveedhi*, which is followed by *Neyar Viruppam*. His greatest work is *Alapanai* which won the Sahitya Academy Award for Tamil in 1999. This was the first time in which a poetry collection from Tamil was considered for this great honour. In the year 1998, he published two of his poetry collections *Muthamizhin Mugavari* and *Pithan*. The credit of introducing Haiku and Ghazal in Tamil literature goes to him. Many of his poems are resplendent with Sufi teachings. In addition, he also authored more than 10 books on collection of literary issues. Although he contributed to many genres in Tamil, he is chiefly remembered for his poetry collections.

As mentioned earlier, **Pithan** has not been translated into English. However, the title of the poem can be translated as 'Madcap' in English. It is an eponymous work in the sense that the madcap is the protagonist who is the connecting link of all the poems as the poet tries to look at different aspects of life through the lens of his protagonist, the madcap. All these poems have a unique approach when it comes to representing life. The idea that we all live by contraries and opposites and how conveniently we are unaware of it is the main crux of this poetry collection.

The protagonist, the madcap attempts to live life by contraries and paradoxes deliberately. He does it rather consciously as he claims that he has seen the other side of the truth which is in sharp contrast to the truth accepted by the society. While describing the character of madcap, the poet says, he is a lover of the contraries and paradoxes. He adds that his protagonist has released himself from the Knowledge prison and he is enlightened because of darkness. Elaborating further the poet says, he has known the beauty of the darkest pages, which the world has never seen and also he has not come to light the lamp but to put it out. He is not someone who has come to wake people but to put them to sleep. Like a honeybee, the madcap is ready to take honey from any flowers without any discrimination. Having understood that truth has many faces, the madcap is ready to kiss them all with affection and finally he has found out that paradoxes are illicit lovers. In this way, the poet defines the madcap as a bundle of contraries and as one can see, his character or traits deviate radically from the accepted societal norms and behavior. In short, he is paradox personified.

In his poem "Ambalam", translated as "Exposed" the poet asks the madcap, why he is called so and why his approach towards life is deviant from the conventional approach, he puts it emphatically,

Once accidentally

Seen the backside

Of the truth

Then

The sunrise of all nights occurred

Veils parted

Opposites joined hands

And danced.

Paradoxes

After removing masks

were seen kissing.

Time and Place disappeared

All becoming one was seen

Being and Nothing

Lost their meaning

That moment,

From the Knowledge prison

I became free (16)

When the poet asks him why people throw stones at him, he tells him that since he is their private mirror, they want to break him for the fear of being exposed as they live in their masks which are convenient to them. In a sense, the madcap can be taken as a metaphor for self which is free from all kinds of pretensions and ideologies.

The poem entitled “ Puthaham” translated as “ Book” is an interesting study on the use of paradox as a major literary device to convey the intended meaning effectively. Through his protagonist , Rahman attempts to deconstruct the stereotypical notion that books alone can make someone knowledgeable. Usually children are encouraged to read books as it is believed that books can develop their cognitive skills and bring in positive changes in their personality. This is a conventional way of looking at books as the best knowledge provider. However, the poem approaches the whole concept in a different way. The poem begins in a startling way in which the madcap says, “Books! Be good to Children. Don’t tear them away” (82). This line may sound very illogical and paradoxical but he has reasons for it. He wonders why books are given to children, when they themselves are books. Further he adds that the books , instead of opening up their horizons of knowledge will only lead to their mental confinement. So he requests children to become more mindful and aware of their surroundings as there are immense possibilities for them to enrich their knowledge. According to him, days and nights are books which can teach them about many things in life. To him, each flower is a text book which offers valuable lessons to children. He says further,

If you had learnt

To read stars

You’d have understood

there's a lot of meanings
in letters
which can't be pronounced.
If you had known
to read your tears
You'd have understood
the essence of man (84)

Finally, the poet concludes the poem saying that real learning takes place through pains and observations and not from letters in books. For him, books are like lamps and to see the Sun (a metaphor for knowledge), lamps are not required. In this way, the poet uses ideas paradoxically to drive home the point that actual learning for children exists outside their textbooks.

Interestingly the poem reminds us of William Wordsworth's "The Table Turned" where he echoes similar ideas, when he asks his friend to give up his books and come into nature as it can provide him with much more wisdom than what he can find in his books. To quote his lines,

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

...

Enough of science and of Art

Close up those barren leaves

Come forth, and bring with you a heart

That watches and receives (n.pag)

As one sees it, Rahman , like Wordsworth adopts a paradoxical approach to contest the claim that books are the only sources of knowledge . Through this technique, he challenges established ideas and conventional perspective and offers a newer way of looking at them.

The poem “Arikkaï” translated as “Report” is another interesting study on the danger of being confined to one ideology as it limits one quest for truth. The poet asks the madcap what his basic principle in life is. He replies instantly that ‘lack of principle’ is his principle in life. One might be quite amused at his reply as it might sound very strange and paradoxical to them. Most people are convinced about the importance of having principles in life as a guiding force to regulate them. However, the madcap has his own logic and views in support of his paradoxical standpoint. According to him, a person who follows a principle gets confined to a cage, a metaphor for mental confinement. He says he is not a bird to be confined to a cage, even if it is made of gold. Further he adds that the caged bird might argue that the roof of the cage is its sky and it might even say that its feathers are a huge burden to it. To the madcap, “ a person who upholds an ideology, will become oblivious of the different dimensions of the truth” (34). He relates this to a fundamentalist, who says that the truth is found only in whatever religion he follows in his life. Rahman comes out with a lot of similes in the poem to illustrate the

importance of being open to different ideas and ideologies as it helps a person in his pursuit of truth. In this way, the poet uses a paradoxical statement in the beginning of the poem as a proposition to assert the need to have an objective approach towards all kinds of truth.

Another poem titled “Urakkam” translated as “Sleep” also employs paradox as a literary technique to approach the subject of sleep in a different way. The conventional ideas associated with sleep are questioned and deconstructed to offer very meaningful insights about life to the readers. Sometimes, sleep is treated with negative attributes like an act of laziness. Rahman adopts a completely different approach to treat the concept of sleep in a positive light and even values it more than the state of being awake. On seeing the madcap with closed eyes, the poet asks him, whether he is asleep. He replies that he is looking at himself. This might appear to be a contradictory statement at the surface level. However, a deep analysis and understanding of the madcap’s views in the poem might reveal that there are different layers of meaning to the statement when he says he is looking at himself with closed eyes. He says,

In wakefulness

You lose yourself.

In sleep

You find out yourself.

In wakefulness

You act donning a costume.

In sleep

You discard all your make-up .

Wakefulness is

Roaming around.

Sleep is

Returning home.

Wakefulness is

For others.

Sleep is

For yourself (73-74)

Finally , he concludes saying that only those who have closed their eyes are able to see the invisible and further asks the readers to let their sleep be their state of wakefulness (a metaphor for inner awakening). Thus Rahman, using a paradoxical statement succeeds in building up his arguments in order to assert the superiority of sleep over wakefulness.

The poem “Pasi” translated as “Hunger” adopts a different approach towards the concept of starvation in order to extol it as an admirable state. Rahman deconstructs the negative shades associated with it to prove that it is a positive quality which benefits human beings in many ways. When the madcap is invited for a feast, he rejects the invitation citing that he celebrates hunger rather than celebrating feast. This is obviously a paradoxical statement which startles the readers. However, the madcap convinces the readers by enumerating the advantages of being in a state of hunger. He says,

You say that

Hunger is born in your stomach

I'd rather say that

You are born in the abdomen of hunger.

.....

You say that

Hunger is the disease

I'd rather say that

Hunger is your medicine

You say that

Hunger blocks your ears

I'd rather say that

It opens up your ears (70-71)

The analysis of the quoted lines will make one understand the benefits of hunger. The poet portrays hunger as a powerful force which drives people to work hard and attain self-identity. Also, he says hunger has medicinal quality as it can accelerate the healing process if a sick person leaves his stomach empty for some time. Similarly, a person in a state of hunger is receptive to all ideas and information as he is desperate to succeed in life or at least to combat his hunger. The poet concludes the poem by asking the readers to “become impregnated with

hunger” (72). Like other poems taken for study, this poem also uses a paradoxical statement as a proposition to explore the subject of hunger from a different angle. In this way, Rahman succeeds in conveying the opinion that being in a state of hunger can give several important benefits to human beings.

Thus Abdul Rahman is original in his approach and the poem taken for study address certain elemental issues concerning the individual and society. The issues are dealt with in a powerful way using paradox as an effective tool. The thought-provoking questions raised by the poet in the selected poems make readers think at a deeper level as they leave such powerful impact in their minds. The nuances and finer aspects of human life, which are otherwise invisible to common eyes, are effectively captured by Rahman’s poetic sensibilities in the poems. With an insatiable curiosity and a deep quest for truth, Rahman explores life and its dynamics in an objective way and without being influenced by any ideologies. The poems taken for study reveal how Rahman has deconstructed the established mindsets and stereotypes using paradox as a strategic tool to present life and truth in their full dimensions.

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