

Reflection of the Post World War II America in the Select Poems of Vijay Seshadri

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Abstract— *Vijay Seshadri is the first Indian American poet to win Pulitzer Prize for poetry. His poems deal with the subject of alienation, racism, condition of refugee, migration, mobility and the issues of war which are also the social and political aspects of American life in the post-World War II era. In his poems, the influence of modern writers like Eliot, Pound and Auden are visible and using these influences he conveys the condition of America in his poems. Even though he has got acclaim with his poem 'The Disappearances' and winning of the Pulitzer Prize, his poems are not yet examined in the field of academics. This paper aims to study his select poems from the collection 'The Disappearances' and 'That was Now, This is Then'.*

Key Words: *Alienation, Ekphrastic Poetry, Intertextuality, Racism, Refugee.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is said by Taine that the work of art is affected by “race, milieu, and moment.” (Britannica) In studying the poems of Vijay Seshadri, one realizes the strong influence of all three elements on his writing. Vijay Seshadri has lived his life in the USA from the time he was taken there from India at the age of five and he had occasional visits to India. His poems reflect the influence of the modern masters like Auden, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Living in the Post World War II era, he also talks about the condition of America wherein there were issues of racism and refugees and where there was development of technology, increase in mobility and the development of suburb areas. The reflection of these conditions in the poems of Vijay Seshadri is studied in this paper.

Looking at the condition of America in the Post World War II era, one realizes that the material development was taking place in America, leading to consumerism. Nundana Dutta writes, “Conditions of life improved; consumer goods such as refrigerators, television sets and other gadgets that made everyday life easier were now available to all, as were the cars that increased

mobility” (Dutta 356) In this condition too, “old issues such as race remained unsolved” (Dutta 356) There was also Vietnam war and issues of refugees aroused because of it.

II ISSUE OF RACISM

Vijay Seshadri’s father moved to America for his Ph.D in Physical Chemistry and Vijay Seshadri was brought to America at the age of five. His poems represent the condition of America in the post-World War II era and his writing show the influence of modern masters of English Literature. There is a strong influence of writers like Eliot, Auden and Ezra Pound in his writing. Though he defines himself as an American poet, his poems show his alienated position in the place he lives in. The same can be found in his interview when he mentions, “In those years before the immigration act of 1965 abolished the rigid quotas imposed on Asian immigration, there were hardly any other Indians around.” (Seshadri 1998) This leads to the feeling of being in an alien space. He also informs in his interview with The Wire, “Not really having a home in mainstream American culture, it was natural that I would find one in this budding counterculture, which was more progressive than anything that the US has since, especially when it came to accepting people who were different” (Puru)

Vijay Seshadri also faced racial discrimination as a child which he mentions in his interviews. Being in Ohio, while talking about his childhood experiences, Vijay Seshadri describes himself as, “Small, brown, bespectacled, alien, and saddled with a name that others thought was unpronounceable” (Seshadri, “My Pirate”) and also mentions that he was, “an easy target for the casual cruelties of childhood.” (Seshadri, “My Pirate”) He also recalls the incident when a boy informed him that he was “nothing but a nigger” (Seshadri, “My Pirate”) Racial discrimination is one of

the problems faced by migrants that hinder the process of acculturation and it is also found in the poems of Vijay Seshadri. There is also us/they binary visible when he depicts his alienation as can be found in his poem 'Alien Nation'. The poet feels being in the wrong place even though he knows the people he is surrounded by. The poet represents the racial attitude of these people. The poem shows hostile attitude of the people towards the persona of the poem. These people are having "their gun ports blazing wide open" (Seshadri, "Alien Nation" 27) It depicts the departure of people from the shore in the ship which has the flag of Jolly Rogers. As Britannica informs, the flag of Jolly Rogers is used, "by pirates and privateers to frighten the crews of other ships into submission." (Comstock, Jolly Roger) From this, it becomes clear that the persona is surrounded by the pirates and they are at the seacoast. After mentioning in two stanzas, the alienation and hostility faces by the poet, in the third stanza, the poet's attitude towards these people is mentioned where he questions the right of these people to enter and alter the land which is covered with "blanket of snow" (Seshadri, "Alien Nation" 27) as they march into the place covered by snow. In this poem, people on both the sides maintain their different position and does not include 'the other' with them. In the context of diaspora, it is mentioned by Pramod K. Nayar, "There is very strong us/them, home/foreign, here/there binaries" (Nayar 196) are at work in the literature dealing with migration which becomes apparent here.

III. THE PROBLEM OF REFUGEE

America became the place inhabited by refugees in the later part of 20th century due to the political turmoil in Vietnam. Nandana Dutta mentions in this context that there came "large number of refugees . . . from Vietnam and from Laos and Cambodia." (Dutta 364-365) The experience of refugees as outsiders and vulnerable to the attacks is also found depicted in the poem of Seshadri which can be seen in the poem 'The Refugee' in which nature is a place to escape from the terrible, violent world around the persona. It is narrated by an anonymous speaker and is about the experience of the persona identified as "He" in it. He is looking as far as "fifteen rows of laid-out soil/ and out to the fence where the much heaps spoil" (Seshadri, "The Refugee" 15). Here, the human

interference in nature becomes visible. The man-made objects are also visible where the swing has rust on it and the "garden-hose coil" (Seshadri, "The Refugee" 15) makes the persona terrified because he gets reminded of the soldier and the oil being sprung from the pipe which "slick the leaf and crap the wing..." (Seshadri, "The Refugee" 15) The poet moves from what is visible outside to the impact of it on the mind of the persona and the image created in his mind which is quite a surrealistic description of the event. The depiction of it presents the persona as a person suffering from trauma and the mention of soldier and rifle in the following stanza justifies the traumatic experience he might have had. It also becomes clear in the second stanza of the poem that the persona of the poem does not belong to the same group as the soldiers that become clear with the distinction made clear between "He" and "We". The speaker belongs to the community suggested by "we" while "He" in the poem does not. Both "He" and "We" are facing each other and the people who belong to the group of "we" in the poem tries to capture him but as the poet mentions, "escapes us to roam in the garden:" (Seshadri, "The Refugee" 15) In the last line, the poet mentions "genocidal past" which also signifies the terrific experience.

IV. INFLUENCE OF MODERN MASTERS IN PRESENTING REALITIES

The subject matters of the poems of Vijay Seshadri are taken from the contemporary American life and are represented with modern techniques which include intertextuality, use of foreign and technical words. Vijay Seshadri's poems are influenced by modern writers like Eliot and Auden which he has also mentioned in his interviews. The interviewer of The Wire mentions, "Seshadri writes, 'like Flaubert's God, Eliot is everywhere present in his work but nowhere apparent'" (Puru) In the same interview he also mentions that in 1980s he turned to the political poems of Auden. The influence of Auden on him is visible when he writes a poem on a painting that deals with the idea of war in his poem and when he talks about the technology surrounding people in present time.

'Goya's Mired Men Fighting with Cudgels', an ekphrastic poem suggests the painting by Goya named, *Mired Man Fighting*. He first portrays the

image as provided in the painting but moves to the current time. Here, the influence of Auden becomes visible. Like the poem, 'The Shield of Achilles', the past and present are reflected here but the subject Auden chooses is more distant and shows clear shift from past to present while Seshadri chooses the painting of 19th century and moves quickly to the present situation without giving hints to the readers. The fighting that harms individuals and war that harms the multiples is also highlighted. The soldier in the war is depicted as wishing to remember and show the image of this destruction and die. Here, Seshadri changes the scene to the soldier in the ditch who, from the almost drowning situation, is uplifted by the persona 'I' in the poem who, as the poet says, is "his/ mirror enemy, image, the brother in wrath" (Seshadri, "Goya's Mired Man" 45) The poet makes the persona feel compassion for his enemy and this reminds one about 'Strange Meeting' by Wilfred Owen where the two soldiers meet after dying in the war. Then, the poet shifts to the history behind the picture and mentions about the "deaf master" which, suggests the political figure behind the war. Thus the poem can be seen as the comment on the destruction by war, detachment of political leaders from the agony of individuals in the war and the expected brotherhood in the world.

'A Fable' by Vijay Seshadri also show the influence of Auden. It is about a man and his son who travels with a donkey and is asked by people to seat on it instead of walking on the road but are criticised and laughed at by the people when they do so. Vijay Seshadri extends the story to the life of both the characters after they come to the town. At first they came to the town and then they moved to the larger town which depicts the migration of the people and also their financial growth. Finally they are in featureless suburb. Their movement to the place that is between the mountain ranges also presents the American scene. The development of suburbs in America was the result of the large migrations that happened in the cities which made them overcrowded. As is said by Nandana Dutta, "in the 1980s there is a sudden attraction for the rural life, for the countryside and for more open spaces, and conditions that would allow Americans to go back to old and cherished ideals of family values, a community life and a slower pace of living that had been lost in the urban rush of the preceding periods" (Dutta 392) Afterwards, Vijay

Seshadri talks about the death of father and the donkey and then extends the story to the family of the son. In depicting that, he writes, "The tally of the generations begins with him/ and extends down the centuries/ and across the hemisphere" (Seshadri "A Fable" 138). This makes one remember the poem 'The Unknown Citizen' by W.H. Auden in which too, there is a mention of the records of the person's life kept by different organizations. Vijay Seshadri also mentions the record of this person's generations kept in CPAs, with neurologists and claim adjusters.

The use of intertextuality and the influence of modern masters are also found in the poem 'Too Deep to Clear Them Away' which takes its title from the poem 'The River-Merchant's Wife- A Letter' in which the husband has gone for five months and the lady says, "By the gate now, the mosses is/ grown, the different mosses,/ too deep to clear them away!" (Pound, n.d.) In the poem by Vijay Seshadri, the title suggests nature at the place which cannot be removed from there in contrast to the people who change their place as soon as their purpose is fulfilled. Here too, the mobility and migration of the modern time are presented. From the names mentioned in the poem, it can be understood that people of various countries had resided on the place before the persona of the poem arrived there and he is called by different women who ask about these men on call. The persona seeks to be in nature instead of going to the movie with a woman who is on call which also shows his preference for solace and nature instead of the entertainment. The poem is in a conversational mode but only the lines spoken by persona is revealed to the readers and they are left to assume what could be the lines spoken by the person on the other side of the phone. While presenting the person living alone, the poem also presents the common temperament of seeking nature which was prevalent in the later part of 20th century America.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be realized that the American influence is felt strongly in the writing of Vijay Seshadri. His writing presents the American world in the Post World War II era through the use of modern techniques like the use of ekphrastic poetry and intertextuality. These elements also represent the influence of modern writers on Vijay Seshadri. His poems also present his alienation from the American society which can be

seen in the poem like 'Alien Nation' and also can also be inferred from the seeking of nature by the persona who is living alone in the poem 'Too Deep to Clear Them Away' and the running away into nature is also found in 'The Refugee'.

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