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ASSIMILATING NEUTER “FACE”: READING A.K.
RAMANUJAN

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to provide a new vantage point to the feminist perspective by the reading of A.K. Ramanujan’s poems – ‘Love Poem for a Wife’, ‘Highway Stripper’, ‘Case History’, ‘On the Death of a Poem’ and ‘Self Portrait’, in context of Levinas’ “face”.

“Early feminist arguments focused upon the unfairness of the fact that women were excluded from some central activities crucial to humanity...” (1, 8-12)

Feminism started as an “emancipation” movement and with time it changed into an equality movement, where the feminists tried to “establish parity with men”, and from the Second wave onwards various co-ordinates entered into feminism – race, colour, class etc. ; but whatever be as Simone de Beauvoir had insisted in her 1949 ‘The Second Sex’, maleness exists as a norm, and so the male/female gender binary grips in all the other co-ordinates, treating “*race, class, and sexuality as peripheral or derivative categories*” (1, 8-12). Thus “sex” or “gender” as the feminist subject and also an identity quotient is a limiting, problematic foundational ground, for as Patrocínio P. Schweickart writes in ‘Reading Ourselves: Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading’,

“Feminist reading and writing alike are grounded in the interest of producing community of feminist readers and writers”,

which clearly puts “woman” in the limelight as the subject/object and speaks of “her inevitable struggle against conventional man.” Thus Feminist as a community neglects the “being” and fails because , “*A true community can only be a community that is not presupposed*”.(9 , 46-47)

The naked “face”:

“The extreme revelation of language in the sense that there is nothing to reveal” (9, 46-47) , suggests on one hand the potent impotent of language and on the other hand the unsayability of the “ pragma auto”; and hence the gendered signifier is a mask, distancing the human in its true essence. In this context Ramanujan’s poetry appears to be the Jeremiah “of ideology” attempting to lead to the “promised land of humanism” , for as A.K Mehrotra writes, “*Ramanujan’s theme is the inadequacy of masks*”(2, 34-36).

The “face” in its nakedness is identity, the “being” for “ *the relationship with a being is an invocation of a face*”(4, 1-18). Ramanujan in ‘Love Poem for a Wife’ emphasizes not on “wife” as a mask, a gendered signified “other”, but on “face” as identity and the failure of understanding the “other” , for he says,

*“we had never known
we would ever know,
my wife’s always
changing syriac face,
chosen of all faces.....”*

Again, the existential dilemma in opposition with the ontological being reflects in the “*loss of face*” as a result of androgynous “being”,

*“of being halfwoman half-
man contained in a common body.”*

“Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions”, and herein lies the failure of reading. The “straw hat”, “white shoe”, “heavy pleated skirt”, “faded pink” blouse, “off-white bra”, “bright red panties” is the text read by the “I” which instigated a homogenized, opposition based understanding of the “I” in ‘Highway Stripper’ where he murdered the “face” of the stripper by attempted understanding and hence negation. Here *“the mask is identical with the face”*(2, 34-36) and so *“at the wheel: / a man / about forty”* shows the failure of understanding, thinking and language. The “face” is signified as “man” while the hat, shoe, skirt, blouse, bra as female to negate the androgynous being with a naked unsigned potent totality in the form of “face”. Thus naming of the “face” *“is a chimera in the Spinozian sense of the term, that is, a purely verbal being”*(8, 35-36). The “face” is thus “the thing itself” which exists in its interiority aloof of the exteriority and herein lies the “promised land” of feminism. Naming or providing with a signifier is providing a meaning and hence murdering of the “face” or the “other” and thus the feminist criticism by negating the individual “face” and by emphasizing on the homogenized woman or by just naming itself “feminist” derived from the word “female” commits violence and murder. If left unthinking the highway stripper in ‘Highway Stripper’ is potent with identity, an existential identity-less ontological being, the being as an “eunuch”, not a cross-dressed but rather a bi-dressed “being” “

*“...but there was only
a man:
had he stripped
not only hat
and blouse, shoes
and panties
and bra,
had he shed may be
even the woman
he was wearing....”*

Moreover when Ramanujan is talking of “face” it is not any finite dimensional entity; Ramanujan’s face utters the Agambenian phrase “I can”, and so Ramanujan in ‘Love Poem for a Wife’ says that the narrator’s wife’s face is,

“.....blessed as by

*butterfly, snake, shiprope,
and grandmother's other
children,
by my only love's only
insatiable envy."*

The variety of blessings from animate (butterfly, snake), inanimate (shiprope) to humane ("grandmother's other children" etc.) releases the "face" to an "openness". Thus Ramanujan's "face" through its "openness" breaks all binaries and naming whatsoever and "*survives actuality and, in this way, gives itself to itself*"(10, 183-184)

Breaking opposition:

"*Thought has always worked by opposition*"(5, 282-285), and thus the dilemma with feminist subject is that they too fall a prey of the phallogentric trap of the "*false consciousness into which women as well as men have been socialized*"(4, 255-256) . The most problematic part is when we are talking of the body signified as "man" or the body signified as "woman" , we are not always speaking or thinking of the "phallus" or "womb", for it would be an out of context thought. Thus the working by opposition not only murders the being but turns into a nothing. The sex signifier is an utter failure except in case of the situation where the male or female organ is in use or action. Thus Ramanujan who picturizes "faces" of "male" and "female", in his 'Case History' describes prostitutes as the womb that the protagonist never fills "with sons"; they are "faceless women". But in other cases "*Images consult one another*" and hence attempts to understand and

*"come
slowly
to a sentence."*

- the ontological death sentence, writes Ramanujan in 'On the Death of a Poem'.

Ramanujan elucidates the homogeneity signified by the phallic father which predominates over existential identity and factuality. The heterogeneous "I" presents a "self-portrait" in 'Self

Portrait, which is the ontological “being”, for he is the “being” constituted of “going beyond that being”:

*“I resemble everyone
but myself.....”*

-and thus “I” is a potent totality. The philosophy of understanding or rather not understanding of Levinas is at work and since “*Understanding carries out an act of violence and of negation*”, so the protagonist’s unthought verdict, potent with possibilities is not “signified”. But as soon as the portrait is “signed in a corner” by the father, the “face” receives a signifier and is named, masked and thus turns a stranger. The result is the ontological crisis faced due to existential realization leading to a identity-less identity, an identity that makes one stranger. The feminist critic in problematizing the signing by the father negates the problem of signing, or rather assigning, for even if signed by the mother, the nakedness of face would be masked.

Feminist Repose:

Perspective always falls a prey to “*one’s inescapable cultural self*” and so it is in E.D. Hirsch’s view, “*spatial and visual, while the matter at hand is neither.*” Ramanujan in his poetry does not present any perspective but just presents. Ramanujan’s “other” in its essential individuality is a “face”- animate, inanimate, or may be an eunuch. Ramanujan’s “other” is not about becoming “male” or becoming “female”, but about “being” and so what escapes understanding is the “face”. Levinas in ‘Entre Nous’ says,

*“The concern of contemporary philosophy to free man..... is
Primarily a matter of our finding a vantage point from which man
ceases to concern us in terms of the horizon of being, i.e., ceases to
offer himself to our powers.”*

Ramanujan’s poetry is a thesis indicating a vantage point through the “face” that Levinas speaks of. Thus the vantage point of “feminist” perspective lies not in becoming feminist, but in being “face”; in shedding both the man and woman that the being is wearing and in reading in this context. Rather than in becoming assimilated, feminist repose lies in being the potent assimilating neuter.

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