

Across Nations and Rivers: Metaphors of Multi-Culturalism in Jeet Thayil's Poetry

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Abstract

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Jeet Thayil allocates attention in revealing his cultural ties with America and India through metaphors pertaining to iconic geographical places in his poetry. He communicates his multi-cultural identity symbolically through metaphors of rivers which are analogous to flexible identities in today's cosmopolitan society. In his poetry, transnational places and the weather of such places seem to structure his memories and thereby create a template for his multi-cultural identity. This paper interprets the metaphors related to rivers symbolizing a fluid multi-cultural identity of the poet through a study of his selected poems. It also configures the ecological and cultural factors for such metaphorical representations by the poet.

Key Words: *Metaphors of Multi-Cultural Identity, Multiculturalism, Transnationalism, Global Culture, Rivers as Metaphors.*

An Overview

Singular and homogenized notions of cultures and nations have been diversifying into multiple and heterogeneous concepts due to transnationalism giving rise to multiculturalism. In the process of transnationalism, people cross over national boundaries retaining cultural ties with their motherland, simultaneously blending with the cultures of their present places. An influx of globalization created possibilities to socio-culturally associate with multiple cultural spaces and rethink the previous notions of a nation-state which limited cultural expansion earlier. Dilution of territorial boundaries between national spaces has allowed cultural assimilation as well as the rise of multicultural identities. The notion of culture is ever-expanding and its unenclosed definition issues possibilities of studying multicultural practices and identities. People travelling across regional and national territories harbour a sense of belonging that transcends geographical spaces due to the accumulation of hybrid identities. Due to multiple physical movements, the identities of such people don't reside in a particular cultural location, but rather at multiple cultural sites. Peripheries of their cultural identities constantly expand with their physical movements. The networks between geographical spaces and cultural identities become significant to re-evaluate how cultural locations transform identities through cultural assimilatory phenomenon.

Jeet Thayil's poems convey his inter flowing physical movements across regional and national spaces which propel cultural assimilation, accentuating the growth of his multicultural identity. His memories are entangled to multiple geographical sites due to his travels which harness his sense of self through memories pertaining to diversified cultural locations. His sense of belongingness has been carved out from his professional cross-national associations as a journalist, poet and musician which made him travel and reside in places like Hongkong, New York, London, Paris, Munich, Bombay and New Delhi. These places receive recurrent mention in his poems articulating how past geographical locations interfere and continue to impact his present existence and identity. There is a binding link between cultures of geographical spaces

and connected memories insinuating the erosion of homogeneous identity and growth of heterogeneous identities. In his poetry, metaphors related to his homeland and other nation-states serve as motifs of his multicultural identity. His assimilative cultural identity can be read from his poems through motifs of iconic architectural sites, foods, and weather of places that bear cultural and historical significance. This paper discusses how Jeet Thayil articulates his multicultural identity by locating himself in numerous cultural spaces and responding to the consistently growing notions of culture in the present time of active globalization. It engages with another pertinent issue of how the sense of space influences the sense of self through the understanding of metaphors from his poetry.

Rivers of Homeland and Abroad

Thayil represents his fluid identity intersecting geographical boundaries through recurrent symbols of places and spaces. In ‘The Haunts’, the Muvattupzha river of Kerala reveals his rootedness to past memories which spur a sense of self, culturally tied to a particular location.

as a boat on the Muvattupzha about to drop
its load of two children and a woman
into the monsoon current,
and if the river had taken them
how much pain would it have made,
how much would it have saved? (Thayil 29)

The Indian subcontinent gets severely impacted due to heavy rainfall and the depiction of the wildness of nature in the monsoon has been well documented in Indian literature. Muvattupzha river situated in Ernakulam district of Kerala can become ruthless in the months of monsoon. Thayil’s experience of this river becomes a symbolic expression of his experience related to a geographical space and attains a prime place in his memory because of its historicity. This representation of his cultural self gives a direction to ascertain that Thayil positions himself in a space of cultural memory which is surrounded by the narratives of rain and flood impacting Keralites. “Autobiographical memories are an essential component of the self. Locke already suggested that losing personal memories amount to losing one’s identity” (Boyer and Wertsch 30). The autobiographical representation of Thayil in ‘The Haunts’ can be read as a poem articulating his cultural past and present as he oscillates between two nodes of cultural memory, one that is located in the past, another in the present, shaped out of the past.

The weather of a geographical space contributes to the construction of cultural identity because changes in weather influences lifestyle and memories which are inherently related to living conditions. It is conducive to state that weather is a significant factor in creating cultural memories, whether collective or individually constructed. “Cultural memories are never purely intragroup or intergroup but are forever taking on fresh nuances in changing historical and personal situations. (Mageo 11)”. Historical episodes indeed shape collective cultural memories with which cultural groups can feel related and thereby conforming to a particular cultural identity. In the culturally conscious space of Thayil, Kerala exists as a topographical and historical site that is accessed by him through his memories to assert his identity. The portrayal

of his cultural self becomes evident again from his poem ‘Monsoon’ in which he reiterates similar memories of Kerala. “The cities I grew up in were landlocked./ One, a capital, buff with architecture,/ the other lost for months in monsoon” (92), lines from ‘Monsoon’ unequivocally express his assimilation of identity with his birthplace. ‘The Haunts’ and ‘Monsoon’ represent his belongingness with Kerala through a parallel relation with the region’s history. Thayil’s attempt at inscribing his regional identity through nostalgia points out that the poet’s individual perception is laced with his memories of his homeland.

The diverse notion of identity keeps on expanding with cultural experiences. Through Thayil’s poetry, it can be observed that two spheres of memories are at play, one that talks about his cultural ties with India, another, talks about his intimacy with America. In the ‘Late Vespers at the Hudson’, Thayil positions himself in that sphere which reveals his connectivity with America. His memory of the Hudson has percolated into his present psyche, creating a space where this river signifies his transnational attachments.

From those to whom much is given
much will be taken away.

I ask for nothing more.

I am standing with my head down.
If you want, I’ll stand here all night
in the wind come raw from the river. (136).

The history of a place becomes a seminal factor in developing a sense of belongingness. Similar to Muvattupzha’s life-threatening characteristics, Hudson is also a place that is associated with deaths as many people commit suicide by drowning in the river. Thayil’s portrayal of the Hudson River reveals his tendency to give significance to iconic geographical places which define the cultural past and present of that place. Geographical places can be viewed as cultural symbols, reacting as catalysts in the creation of memories, vis-a-vis identities.

In his poetry, Muvattupzha of Kerala and Hudson of the U.S., both represent his cross-national bonds, terminating territorial based cultural identities. His memories of Kerala and the U.S. through the depiction of rivers assign meanings to his multi-cultural identity. His fusion of memories transgressing borders conveys his evolving identity which moves continuously, similar to the movement of rivers. Like a continuously flowing river, his cultural identity can also be observed in continuous movements, overcoming barriers of homogeneity. In his poems, Thayil transcends identities demarcating national boundaries through the depiction of rivers across nations. In such poems, rivers serve as metaphoric tools and the mention of rivers outside India defines the importance of such places in his conscious memories.

John Berryman jumped into the frozen
Mississippi, a terminal case of love

deferred, suicide son of a suicide.

Before the jump he wrote: ‘I didn’t and

I didn’t sharpen the Spanish blade.’ (247)

It is pertinent to the discussion of Thayil’s multicultural identity that its outcome has been nurtured by narratives from various cultures. The narrative of American poet, John Berryman’s suicide by jumping into the Mississippi river discloses that narratives from other cultures share the same place of memories, along with his cultural memories of the homeland. The common link between rivers seems to coalesce his perception of rivers, even across nations. In his poems, a recurrent representation of rivers as a symbol of death can be studied. Assigning similar attributes to these rivers, one located in India and the other in America, justifies the perspective to view that physical spaces transcending nations integrate with memories of home and abroad. American poet, John Berryman’s suicide by jumping into the Mississippi river establishes Thayil’s attempts at showing how rivers become a liminal space transporting people to a transcendental zone. He has recurrently acknowledged the tragic scenarios which may occur or have occurred in the physical space of rivers through his poems. Rivers as a liminal space operates at two levels in his poetry, one, physical transportation across places, and transcendental transportation across spaces, at another.

In his poem, ‘Saint Mummy’, the poet again represents rivers as a space providing transcendental escape.

the Astonishing, climbed trees & buildings;

hid in ovens or cupboards; could not abide

people, for she smelled sin inside;

loved knives, wept, ate all manner of things;

led the dead to purgatory, then paradise;

let herself be dragged under water; loved tombs; (Saint Mummy 48)

In ‘Saint Mummy’, the concept of a river can be perceived as a liminal space offering a way towards purgation, a transcendental transportation to an imagined realm. Similar to ‘Saint Mummy’, a river having the attribute of cleansing can also be read from ‘Late Vespers at the Hudson’ when the poet says, “in the wind come raw from the river” (136). Rivers act as a space located at the crossroads of physical existence and spiritual existence, as a medium to carryover existences from one place to another.

Thayil registers the movement of a river across places which contributes to the liminal nature of rivers in ‘The New Island’. In this poem, the poet recalls a time when heavy rainfall had flooded a region. “Somehow the house kept itself clear of the/ river that had made it a new island,/ but everything around us was water” (115), conveys that the poet gives great emphasis on rivers and rain while writing from his memories. Further, the poet continues through “and our few feet of hammered wood, our floor,/ took us in to/ lamplight, voices, the shore” (115), noting the shifting and moving nature of rivers which re-emphasizes the liminality of rivers. He mentions in the poem that the flood occurred due to September rains. In India, the retreating

monsoon or southwest monsoon causes heavy rainfall in the southern states. Thayil's poetic sentiments are enamoured by his regional memories and recurrent reference of rivers and rain in his homeland and across the borders reinstates the idea that the formation of his identity has been a hybrid process.

Rivers, Rain and Migration

Monsoon in Kerala has etched memories in the poet's mind. Similar to the poem 'Skewed', where he talks about his reluctant preparedness for winter, Thayil talks about his experience on monsoon's atrocious nature in Kerala. He chooses to be explicit while specifying "safe-sided contours of Kerala blur", portraying the blurred or submerged river banks and areas. It is intriguing to witness that how the poet gives space to his memories of home and abroad in the context of nature. The climate of a certain place can be significant in creating memories and identities. Identities manifest due to memories and memories define one's past existence shaping the individual notion of self.

Oyster-tongue, mangrove maw, the river's raw
sour breath, its moist air encumbered with mud,
mad with waiting and grief, ready now to shed
upwards its uncooling of earth's dry dirt-thrill,
long-held summer vertigoes of the ringing light
when the safe-sided contours of Kerala blur
to dazed stillness before the grand chaos of wind,
every fur and scurry must stop, pause in a pose of
praises and prayer; (194)

The blurring of river banks can be perceived in correlation to the blurring of his homogeneous identity. As he writes from his memories of the past, he assembles shreds of his memories, constructing his dynamic notion of self.

The idea of rivers being a medium of destruction in Kerala and also a metaphorical space transporting him to different journeys have been combined with the idea that how rain impacts him. In the poem, 'Premonition', water's life-giving attribute can be seen in the intersection with Indian culture.

When it rains, the dead descend, you appear,
the smell of rainwater in your hair,

wearing the ring I placed on your finger,
a scent like heat and a voice not yours, a
child's voice singing of age-old danger,

in Hindi, a lover's lament from *Pyasa*. (83)

In this context, rain signifies the obliteration of thirst. On one hand, the first two lines of the poem suggest that when rain arrives, "the dead descend", where dead represents the inactive or motionless body, on the other, the last lines, state the retention of thirst or desires unfulfilled. There is a representation of a paradoxical situation in the poet. In this poem, longing of a lover is enmeshed with rain. In Indian tradition, rainfall awakens the desires of lovers to meet. In contexts of Indian texts, lovers long for union but in the poem, it can be observed that there is a juxtaposition of rainfall and heat. The reference of the film, *Pyasa* (thirsty one), connotes the idea that the arrival of rain has not quenched the thirst of a lover.

In the poem, *The Man who Married Water*, the poet uses the metaphor of water to indicate destruction/death/loss.

Though his wife be jealousy,
she was water, she watched with
eyes of rain as the whales'
ancient terrain cracked,
the old routes now
led elsewhere, to a great
head stunned by land,
bound by sand. He
found himself drowned. (170)

The sense of loss in the poem is profound as meanings associated with the idea of loss can be multiple. An evident meaning can be drawn from the poem that the poet talks about failed relations. In this context of loss, "ancient terrain cracked" can be considered as a phrase articulating the ruin of an old relationship or customs. Further, "found himself drowned", determines the poet's attempt at connecting loss or death by drowning in water, re-telling water's capabilities of destruction, resonating with poems like, 'Monsoon' and 'The Haunts'.

In the poem, 'Recovery, Partial', rain again becomes a metaphor for destruction or loss.

I am fearful this gift will pass
and take with it everything,
my new life in a city of fragile buildings,
small needs for bread or coffee
or a shared cigarette,
the smoke flattened by rain (132).

Thayil explicitly mentions the health crisis he faces through “I have a scar on my belly,/ old punctures on my arms,/ a bad liver./ I have problems sleeping” (132). Then he goes on by saying that “But I know I can wake/ without hearing the old command,/ ‘Feed me or else’” (132) which represents the commands of one’s hunger or desires. By looking at a poem from a broad perspective, it can be considered that Thayil’s little desires are being affected by his health. In this context, rain becomes an element that destroys his minimal desires.

In ‘Gabreel in America’, eels become a symbol for migration and movement in a new place.

Strips of rain, white
sheets cut and knotted.
The moon’s half sister
eels to heel, elongated,
a new river
on 87th Street (128).

This poem can be conceived at two levels, first, eels as a metaphorical representation of migration as they migrate from the ocean to inland lakes in New York which represents Thayil’s migration to a new land. Particularly from an ecological point of view, another dimension of meaning can be read that due to rain, migration of eels intensifies which can make them endangered. Thayil’s metaphoric expression identifying himself as an immigrant and also a voice articulating environmental crisis can be perceived from this poem.

In ‘Afloat, the Immigrant Martyr Elect’, Thayil talks about immigration which is a reminder of the rules and protocols to be followed by the immigrants.

I step off the plane,
bob like flotsam
above the scene
of future martyrdom.

The world machine
– I know – waits to greet me
with blood tests, green ink, spy cameras, ID. (168)

Thayil’s consideration of the global space as being a mechanic lays out his idea of a world where identities are recognized through rules. In ‘The Future Infinities’, Thayil dwells upon the infinite possible identities that are placed within the bubble of South-Asia. “All over those bland, continuous/ states, in ghettos, amalgamated beyond/ Sikh, Muslim, Hindus to one easy race-/ name, South Asian, one umbrella brand,” (39) which brings attention to the point that the tag of

South-Asia blurs the boundaries of identities based on religious notions, creating a space for the residence of multiple cultures. The poet's rejection to compartmentalize his own identity can be read from his poems as he represents a blend of his experiences across local regions and within India and other nations.

In his poem, 'Migration', the immigrants are described as "The cripple" but with "Inner Riches" whose ordeals appear as news in the "aspectless houses, of TV noise" (127). Thayil's migration to another nation for academic pursuits and for professional engagements can be seen getting reflected in his poems. He relates himself to the immigrants who adjust to new weather, particularly with cold nights, such as in the poem 'London', 'My Paris' and 'Skewed'. In 'Skewed', his familiarity with the streets of America and this recognition act upon the poet's psyche. "I am on a street, already somewhere –/ say downtown, say Perry and Hudson,/ where Hart Crane lived for a summer/ and Dylan Thomas fell, as if into sleep" (167), are iconic cultural symbols representing the poet's emotional dwelling in memories of past experiences. Such experiences harness the present state of being through accumulated memories, contributing to the creation of an ever-expanding identity. These past multi-cultural experiences display an analogy between his experiences of international cultures. His poems reveal an overlapping connection between his physical movements across geographical borders and his imagined spatial movement through rivers across nations.

Conclusion

The iconic geographical spaces which attain recurrent mention in Thayil's poems are cognitively structured upon historical narratives. Such references determine his experiences and awareness of diverse cultural histories. His individual and cultural memories cannot be segregated under categories, which denotes a hybridization of his identity. His attempts at unfastening himself from a homogenized identity through metaphors of rivers across nations articulate his alignment with cosmopolitan and transnational identities.

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