

Regional or Universal literature? – A comparative study of the novelistic spaces of C.-F Ramuz and R.K. Narayan

Dr. Siba Barkataki

Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Abstract- R.K Narayan and C.F Ramuz are two writers belonging to two countries known for their pluralistic natures: linguistic, ethnic and religious. In this form of diversity we see the simultaneous valorization of a cosmopolitan tendency as well as of the regional specificities. Such a situation that seems to be positive for society proves to be problematic in literature as universal and regional specificities begin opposing each other. A writer's work is faced with the dilemma of being termed either as regional literature or world literature. The former is considered to be inferior to the latter. It is this dichotomy that is faced by R.K Narayan and C.F Ramuz. In this study we will investigate the theoretical framework, if any exists, forming the basis of such a categorization; the objective being, the determination of the factors that decide whether an author should be considered as a regional or a universal writer.

Index Terms- emotions, metaphysical dimension, novelistic space, realism, regional literature, universal literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the title of my study suggests, we will focus on two key terms: regional and universal. These two terms generally refer to two political and geographical spaces. However, when used in the context of literature, these two spaces oppose each other; regional literature is seen as being inferior to universal or world literature. In the present study we will analyze this dichotomy in the light of the novelistic spaces of two writers namely, R.K Narayan and C.F Ramuz. Both these authors face the consequences of the regional/universal duality.

There are various elements common to R.K Narayan and C.F Ramuz. First and foremost, both these authors are contemporaries, belonging to two countries – India and Switzerland – characterized by linguistic, religious and ethnic plurality. This diversity is proof, on the one hand, of the cosmopolitan nature of Indian and Swiss societies and on the other hand, of the importance accorded to the existence of regional identities. While C.F Ramuz stories are rooted in the Swiss rural countryside of the Canton of Vaud, R.K Narayan paints an Indian universe, more particularly, a south Indian village life. Furthermore, both the writers evoke universal and timeless themes in their stories like love, death, old age etc. Finally, both Narayan and Ramuz have received mixed reviews on their works from literary critics, which makes it difficult to ascertain whether they are regional or universal writers.

Narayan has been subject to an uncertain and ambiguous evaluation from his occidental critics. While on the one hand, his writing has been received in the international literary circuit as

belonging to “World Literature”, on the other hand, his critics lament the absence of an accurate, almost journalistic, account of the Indian historic landscape in his books.

In the case of Ramuz, on the one hand he is celebrated at the National scale as the Swiss national author. This, however, is a title that the author refuses to accept, since for Ramuz “Switzerland does not exist”, as according to him, the country is a collection of entities without any real unity (Moser-Verrey, 1992). On the other hand, his work is relegated, by certain critics, to the ranks of regional literature since the author evokes a rural world where his characters are mainly farmers. His critics see Ramuz's novelistic space as a closed space that does not envision a holistic world view. As a result, despite the author's continuous efforts to accord a cosmic dimension to his local space, his novels are, at the very outset, associated with regionalism.

We are therefore faced with a difficult paradox in the way both these authors are perceived by their critics. Although Narayan's work is considered to be a part of World Literature, there is a strong attempt to identify local, regional or national elements in his novels. On the contrary, Ramuz, who aspires to attain a universal dimension through his novels, is categorized as a regionalist. Thus, both the authors directly or indirectly confront the persistent “regional/universal” dichotomy. In light of this dilemma, the following problem comes to the forefront in the form of two questions:

1. How can a novel portray regional elements and still be considered as being part of World/Universal Literature?
2. Given the fact that a regional element is composed of form and content, what kind of content has the virtue of aligning with the universal perspective?

II. RESEARCH ELABORATION

We commence our study with the understanding that a literature is not universal, at the very outset; it becomes so during the course of its reception. It is a way of reading and perceiving a culture. This perception can be divided into two positions or two view points. The first optic is one in which we consider that a literary work brings in a new vision, opens a new window to a world of new interpretations. This further enriches the idea of plurality, given the fact that plurality is nothing but a collection of specificities and singularities of nations and of peoples. Plurality gives us a complete and wholesome picture of humanity. A reading of this nature gives the reader a sense of multiple-belonging and allows him to submerge cultural differences. The second position is ethnologic which views a certain people as the insular “other”, geographically and culturally different, who needs to be observed, studied and discovered. This approach, possibly effective in scientific studies, becomes problematic in literature, especially when one is

required to study a “local” element from a universal perspective. It is in such cases that the “local” or “regional” aspect becomes a problem.

First, let us consider R. K Narayan’s writings. Narayan was witness to the decolonization of India. However, his novels do not contain descriptions or direct references to this painful episode of Indian history. Many of his western critics lament this absence, so much so that his novels suffered a cold reception in many western countries. The position of his critics vis-a-vis Narayan’s novels highlights the difficult rapport that exists between literature and history. Going by his critics, Narayan’s writing should contribute and enrich the study of a particular history and of a particular civilization, that of India. A similar trend exists in the case of Francophone Studies. In this perspective, Claire Riffard –specialist of Malagasy Francophone Literature- declares: [...] contrary to French literature, the study of Francophone literatures has been and is still superposed by a study of civilizations, as though these literatures are more valuable due to their ethnological importance rather than their literary merits. As a result, the literary aspect is undermined for the benefit of information. (Riffard, 2006)

It is therefore clear that the critics want Narayan’s novels to bear testimony to a particular reality, that of India’s painful transition to becoming an independent nation of which Narayan himself was a witness. However in his novels, one goes through a completely different experience: a parapsychic experience. Symbolic of his style, this experience is a marvelous mix of irony, fantasy and the metaphysical element that is fused into the real dimension. Such a unique vision however disturbs the critics since the writer leaves the real objective dimension and slips into a subjective space. T.D Brunton comments on this shift operated by Narayan when he states: “When the vein of fantasy predominates, his writing slips into escapism and triviality.” (Brunton, 1968)

In *The English Teacher*, Narayan highlights the autobiographical character of the novel and discards all other explanation. He goes on to lament the reaction of his reviewers who failed to understand his aesthetical experiment in the novel: The writer declares: “*The English Teacher* is all about my life with Rajam. The concluding chapters of the book were concerned with the psychic experiments, and the English critics predictably lashed them out. “Of course”, Narayan said gleefully, the reviewers did not realize that the whole story was autobiographical – that I myself had been a witness to the experiment. But what’s the use?” (Narayan, 1962). In his comment, Narayan points out the manner in which his experiments as a writer were misunderstood in the west. His writing is realist but it does not correspond to the classical realism of the west. Here we have an author who describes an ordinary and everyday Indian space and adds to this reality an element of fantasy and the metaphysical. Narayan’s portrait of an ordinary Indian life that one normally calls “trivial and fragmented” stands as a stark contrast to the obscure and exotic India depicted in E.M Foster’s *A passage to India*.

A similar situation is confronted by C.-F Ramuz. His writing is realist in so far as he depicts the simple lives of the simple people of the Swiss Cantons of Vaud and Valais. His characters are mainly farmers, artisans, winegrowers and shepherds. On the other hand, unlike realist writers, including Flaubert, who “dislike the realities that they write about”, for Ramuz, the

beauty and grandeur of life exists in the ordinary. He does not reduce his characters to the status of banal and insignificant beings. On the contrary, it is through the customs and habits of ordinary life that his characters become extraordinary beings, capable of achieving extraordinary feats; so much so that they can be likened to the heroes of Racine’s plays.

The deeper Ramuz delves into the material world in order to portray a concrete and loyal picture of the real external world, the deeper he penetrates into a second reality whose unintelligible boundaries are perceptible only to human senses. It is said that Ramuz interrogates man in a phenomenological manner, in a way that all his descriptions speak of the mystery of the human condition without ever naming or describing the mystery.

Based on our understanding of their novelistic spaces we can state that both Narayan and Ramuz are realist writers however their realisms cannot be categorized under the conventional form of literary realism. Furthermore, the dimensions of the so-called conventional literary realism are broadened due to the intrusion of a second reality i.e., a metaphysical element in the novelistic space. Their novelistic spaces are home to two types of complementary realities. On the one hand, their novels represent an immediate reality wherein an object is described exactly as it is perceived by the author. On the other hand, their novelistic spaces are open to perspectives of a new order of reality: a second reality that is obscure since it exists beneath the visible denotative reality. This second reality deals with various unexplained aspects of the human condition such as fate, the power of imagination and belief, birth and death etc. While this dimension manifests itself in man’s everyday life, its presence is not perceptible to human intelligence. In their novels such a reality can only be perceived by human senses.

Furthermore, Narayan like Ramuz, evokes a local space that however cannot be identified on the map. While Narayan creates an imaginary Indian village called “Malgudi”, Ramuz uses the Swiss cantons of Vaud and Valais as the backdrop for his novels, without providing any definite information on their locations. Moreover it is almost impossible to place his novels in a specific period of history that accords a certain timelessness to his art. This dual dissolution of space and time renders eternal their fictive worlds and at the same time, it singles out their literary visions. Ramuz defends his aesthetic position by stating that it is the inherent desire of all man especially of the author to become eternal. We are therefore bound to inquire if Narayan and Ramuz seek to conceal ethnological information within or behind an imaginary world so as to discourage critics from using their writings as documents to study a civilization. Their fictive worlds evoke an authentic local space while very skillfully evading any precise reference that might contribute to promoting an ethnological study at the cost of a literary reading. Thus, these novels talk of man’s complex situation, giving an exact picture of the human condition but at the same time they steer clear of the journalistic vision.

One must admit that in the case of Narayan, the other no longer feels like a stranger. Despite the few Indian terms and references, the non-Indian reader never feels disoriented. Graham Greene confirms this sense of familiarity in Narayan’s works when he states: “Narayan wakes in me a spring of gratitude, for he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be an Indian.” (Greene, 2003) This

impression of a “second home” is the exact feeling one gets when reading Ramuz’s novels. Ramuz calls this impression the “superior resemblance”. (Ramuz, 1967) The feeling of a “second home” or that of a “superior resemblance” is experienced when the reader is able to perceive and capture the emotion communicated by the author. According to Ramuz, all the elements of nature, including man, are nothing but receptacles of emotions. These emotions are universal and the goal of art is not only to lead man to the discovery of these emotions, but also to help communicate them to others. In this vein he declares: “Let’s consider that art, born out of emotion, leads to emotion and its prime form of action is communicating emotion”. (Ramuz, 1970) A work of art is immediately perceived, understood and experienced only when sentiments and emotions are represented with utmost fidelity. It is this very honest representation of emotion that constitutes the originality of both our authors; thus rendering their realism unique. Art can only communicate with the ordinary man who is in touch with his emotions. In doing so, man elevates into a cosmic being as he begins communicating with his emotions that are also universal. He transcends the barriers of race, colour and nationality, which in the words of Ramuz are “mere external differences”.

Narayan’s novels, like those of Ramuz’s, represent emotions that are most common place. These emotions are universal as they are experienced by the common man living in very different life conditions irrespective of their geographies. Most often than not, it is only the toponym or the anthroponym that brings in a slight change in tone and decor. Let’s take for example Narayan’s novel *Swami and Friends* which evokes the “familiarity” that Graham Greene talks about: “It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday, it was difficult to get into the Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building: the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class-teacher; and the head master with his thin long cane...” (Narayan, 1934).

Now let’s examine a passage from Ramuz’s novel *Aimé Pache, Peintre Vaudois*, where we can find a similar feeling of “familiarity” or of a “superior resemblance”: “The stretch of land looked strange. It looked like an old piece of clothing made by joining bits of green and brown clothes, stitched together with a thick grey thread making networks of roads along the cloth, embroidered in certain places accentuating the laces shaped like trees that were shaded on top and looked they were stained by water.” (Ramuz, 1911)

Ramuz compares the landscape that stretches in front of his eyes to an “old piece of cloth”. The spectacle which at first seemed strange to him, eventually acquires a familiar form. Each element of nature no matter how irregular such as the roads, the different colours, the trees, the hill slopes, the shadows etc., is represented with the help of different parts of an old piece of used cloth. Ramuz brings the natural landscape to his personal dimension by using an image that is known to him. Thereafter, the “strange land” begins to acquire a familiar dimension as it is compared to an object belonging to man’s everyday life, “an old piece of cloth”. It is an object that one can not only see but also touch and feel. It is also possible to assign a sensation, a smell and a weight to this object. The feeling aroused in the reader when reading

about the “strange stretch of land” will be an emotion that is personal and universal at the same time. This emotion is endowed with components that accord a tangible dimension to it. Furthermore, the choice of themes plays an important role in the selection of emotions to be represented. Keeping in mind this perspective Ramuz declares : “Life, love, death, primitive things, things that are present everywhere and have existed forever. For these elements (whether African, Chinese, Australian or Swiss) to make an impression, they have to be experienced in an immediate and local situation and space, perceived by the senses so that they are immediately understandable and profoundly lived and accepted”(Ramuz, 1967).

III. CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

The use of universal themes coincides with its representation in a specific region *immediately understandable* and *immediately lived*. This does not however imply a deterritorialization or a homogenization of local traditions. On the contrary, it suggests an immersion into a known, local and native real space in order to perceive and process sensations and emotions directly without any intermediaries. According to this perspective, one attains the universal only through the local or the regional. Ramuz defends this position when he states: “People have always accused me of being narrow minded because I have always sought to represent a very small regional space [...] However this local space for me is only the launch pad of a trampoline which lets me soar high up and come back, only to rise up again...” (Ramuz, 1970).

In Narayan’s and Ramuz’s novels, it is this regional space, the elementary object and the ordinary daily life that contain the source of the Universal. I would like to conclude this study by first presenting a summary of our findings:

Choosing between a sense of belonging to multiple cultures and a sense of insularity becomes an ethical question rather than an aesthetic one. In order to encourage this optic, Narayan and Ramuz make aesthetic choices that are in tune with their creative instincts: they create fictive regional spaces, they are preoccupied with the ordinary man and a system of life that belong to the local dimension. There is also an intrusion of a metaphysical dimension in their unique novelistic spaces. These aesthetical decisions give us the following two results:

a. We get a portrait of the human condition that is captured in an extremely specific regional space.

b. The reader begins to appreciate the literary value of their novels rather than focus on collecting information about a certain culture.

- The representation of such a unique form of reality coinciding with the metaphysical dimension gives the author the opportunity to broaden the dimensions of classical literary realism.

It is important to highlight the aesthetic way in which Narayan and Ramuz confront the regional/universal dichotomy. The object (whether it is a region, the people, the elements of nature etc.) is the form. The form is regional or local or native. This form contains a substance. It is the substance that is universal. It is the work of the author to render the reader sensitive to the local form so that he can easily penetrate into the regional and have access to the substance that it contains. It is therefore through the regional that one can attain the universal. In this vein

Ramuz declares: « What I seek is the intensity, the one that resides within”. (Ramuz, 1970) The following quotation by Ramuz resumes the question that we have tried to answer in this paper:

“What would Aeschylus have done if he were born in 1878, somewhere in my country, the canton of Vaud? Being Aeschylus would he have written the Persians? ” (Ramuz 1970).

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AUTHOR

Dr. Siba Barkataki is a Research Scholar in Jawaharlal Nehru University in the Centre for French and Francophone Studies, New Delhi. In her doctoral thesis she studies the unique form of realism that exists in the entire novelistic work of Swiss author C.-F Ramuz. Her other area of research interest includes the Indian Ocean Francophone Literature. (email:sibab2010@gmail.com).