

UNIVERSALITY AND CULTURAL VARIATION IN METAPHORS IN MAHARSHI RAMANA'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Metaphor and its versatility as a mode of thought continue to offer areas to scholars which still remain to be explored. Universality and cultural variation are two aspects of metaphor which have been discussed by the scholars in the West at length. Zolton Kövecses, Raymond Gibbs, Gerard Steen, Olaf Jakel and many others have discussed it in view of cognitive theory of metaphor but the area stills needs to be explored in Indian literature. Zolton Kövecses has devoted a whole book to this particular study of metaphor in Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Cultural Variation (2005). Gerard Steen and Raymond Gibbs have discussed this aspect in Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics (1997). Olaf Jakel has written extensively on the subject. He has also discussed conceptual metaphor, the cognitive theory of metaphor and its tenets applied to religious texts in his articles published in Metaphorik De. He discusses nine main tenets of cognitive theory of metaphor in "Hypothesis Revisited: The Cognitive theory of metaphor Applied to Religious Texts". The present paper is an attempt to locate the universality and cultural variation in metaphors engendered in Indian literature with reference to the poetry of Maharshi Ramana, a South Indian saint.

Keywords: University, cultural variations, metaphor

INTRODUCTION

The versatility of metaphor is opening many new doors for scholars working in diverse fields. The traditional view of metaphor treats it as an embellishment for artistic and rhetorical purposes. The Cognitive View of Metaphor defines metaphor as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain (Kövecses: 2010 p. 4). Abstract concepts that define everyday realities of states and causation are metaphorically structured and can be reduced to primary metaphors. Therefore, metaphors in literature are highly conventional at the level of conceptualization, as the human experiences from which they take shape are same globally. Concomitantly, metaphors in literature also differ as the writers belong to different sets of society as well as they follow different behavioral patterns, customs, beliefs, institutions, habits and traditions of that particular society. Language takes shape in a particular culture. The sum total of shared traditions, customs and understandings characterize a group of people in a country. Obviously culture also affects metaphorical thought. Consequently, metaphors become culture-specific and vary from culture to culture. The universality in metaphors takes us beyond cultures and makes them discernible in many if not all of the languages of the world. Universality and cultural variation in metaphors brings two postulations to mind:

1. There are experiences, perceptions and mental states which are universally same and are embodied in metaphors in the same way.

2. There are occurrences, practices and habits in a particular culture and are specifically expressed in a culture. These are the roots from which different metaphors crop up.

The present paper explores the presence of such metaphors in the poetry of Maharshi Ramana. Universal metaphors reflect Maharshi's response to a situation or a happening much in keeping with the universality of reactions concurrent in many cultures whereas cultural variation adds to variety. The paper also finds out that metaphors in Maharshi Ramana's poetry also differ not only at the intra-culture but also inter-culture level.

MAHARSHI RAMANA

Maharshi Ramana was blessed with glimpses of pure Self-realization which suffused and irradiated his whole life. His poetry is about the resplendent bliss of divine knowledge attained through Self-enquiry. The journey of self-the- body to the Self-the- awareness is documented in his poetry through various metaphors which form the crux of his philosophy.

Born in 1879 to an uncertified pleader Sundaram Aiyar and Alaggmal in Tiruchuzi about thirty miles from Madurai, Maharshi had an ordinary childhood of a school boy. His father died when he was twelve and the family moved to his uncle's house. He was Intelligent but indifferent to his studies. Perhaps God predestined his life for a different course which not many take. Maharshi Ramana realized the Self—the *Atman*, the universal consciousness in this mortal body at the tender age of seventeen. He heard about *Arunachala* from an old couple and felt an indescribable ecstasy. The mountain later became a permanent abode for him till he completed the sojourn of earthly life. Another experience transformed his life. One day in his uncle's house in July 1896, he had a feeling of impending death despite being perfectly well. The feeling gave rise to many questions regarding dilemma of human life. If the body was dying, what made him realize the full force of his personality? The spirit was awake. He heard the voice of 'I' within him as a deathless spirit. David Godman describes this experience as indivisible and universal consciousness. (Godman: 1985 p. 1).

UNIVERSAL AND CULTURE-SPECIFIC METAPHORS

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson talk about conceptual metaphor in *Metaphors We Live By*. They find, "The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture." (Lakoff and Johnson: 1980 P.. 22). Hence, deeply embedded values in a culture will be reflected in its metaphors.

Raymond W. Gibbs in *Poetics of Mind* fined human cognition shaped by poetic or figurative processes. He admits that some general principles govern all aspects of human language. How we speak about our experiences is closely tied to the way we figuratively conceptualize our lives. (1994 p.13). Zolton Kövecses discusses the universality and variation in metaphors, their causes, coherence and the aspects in *Metaphors in Culture* (2005).

Gerad Steen in "From Three Dimensions to Five Steps: The Value of Deliberate Metaphor" in *Metaphorik De* (2011) about deliberate and non-deliberate metaphors. He adds a third dimension of communication to the already existing two dimensions of metaphor—language and thought. He finds that the communicator instructs the addressee to view one thing in terms of the other by mental representations. "Deliberate metaphors are perspective changers", he says. (Steen: 2011 p. 84) .

People can make sense of many human experiences, emotions and thoughts within the range of conventional mechanisms universally. Manifested in different languages, they generate

metaphors which can be understood by all. The Free Dictionary defines “boil over” which means “to erupt in great anger”. The same expression is available in Hindi as “*Khoon Kholna*”. The expression indicates that body heat stands for anger. The same metaphorical expression is perceivable in Hungarian, Japanese, Zulu and Chinese languages. In English a person may say “you make my blood boil”. Japanese use the expression “anger seethes inside the body”. Hungarians use “blood rises up to the head”. Chinese use “one’s *qi* (*qi* is conceptualized like a gas or fluid that flows through the body) wells up like a mountain”. In Zulu, they say “he was so angry, he burst”. (Zolton 198-202). Another example of metaphor is used for death. “She passed away” means “she died” in English. It indicates life as a journey. The same expression is perceivable in Hindi “*Veh Gujar Gayi*”. In flowery Hindi, one can see in newspapers the obituary for someone’s death as “... *apni sansarik yatra poori kar ke*” (completed the journey of world), “*swarg sidhar gaye hai*” (went away to heaven). (Dainik Bhaskar : Feb. 3, 2013, 16).

It could be better explained with an example from Punjabi language—one of the languages in India. Knowing Punjabi culture well, it could be explored along with its metaphorical import. A folk song, we came across in childhood, talked about sister-in-laws drinking pure unboiled milk after they marry off their husbands’ sisters. The song goes like this “*Ena sakiya bhabhiya na dola tor ke kaccha dudh peeta*”. It is important to go into the background of the song. Girls in India are considered liability on their parents, a feeling which continues even now in most parts of the country. Here, parents have to marry off the daughters as a part of parental responsibility. The thought may appear queer to the people in the West, where society is more liberal and girls marry on their own. When daughters leave the homes of their parents to join their in laws’ houses, the family heaves a sigh of relief. The situations are metaphorically explained in the song by drinking milk symbolic of relief.

Another beautiful example from a poem written by Shiv Kumar Batalvi, a profound Punjabi poet, would suffice to explain it further. The poem is “*Mai ni Mai mere geetan de naina wich birhon di rarak pave*”. There are two interpretations possible. The irritation caused may be because of a piece of small stone (interpreted by Ratnenadra Pandey) or a speck of wheat stalk flying into the eye of a farmer as we see it.

Mai ni Mai- O mother

Mere geetan de naina wich- in the eyes of my songs

Birhon di- Of separation from those I love

Rarak pave- irritation caused

O mother! Separation from those I love causes an irritation in the eyes of my songs as a piece of stone or a speck of wheat stalk causes in the eye of a farmer. Thus the role of culture in the conceptualization of metaphor cannot be denied. Metaphors also vary within a particular culture.

India, for instance, is a country of diverse people with diverse habits and traditions of which some are common and others vary. The culture gives an import to metaphorical language.

MAHARSHI RAMANA’S POETRY

Maharshi’s poetry displays both universality and cultural variation in his metaphors as the study proves by the analysis of his poems. The metaphors cited below have been taken from Maharshi Ramana’s anthology of *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (2007 edition) the following is a list of metaphors from his poetry:

Universal	Culture specific
I. Body	a. Banana Leaf
II. Blossom	b. Lotus
III. Up and down	c. Strumpet
IV. Dog	d. Poppadum
V. Honey bee	e. Amlak
VI. Sun	f. Marital garland

UNIVERSAL METAPHORS

Universality of metaphors is rooted in most of the human experiences related to daily life. Conceptual universal metaphors can be classified according to the cognitive function they perform. Zoltan classifies them into three categories: Structural, Ontological and Orientational. (Kovesces, 2010 p.20) Some of the metaphors in Maharshi's poetry can be discussed under these three categories. However, the other metaphors have been discussed separately.

Body

Structural metaphors provide a rich knowledge store-house for the target domain. The concept of time, for example, as Zoltan defines is structured according to motion and space. In "The Marital Garland of Letters", Maharishi uses the metaphor of space when he celebrates the union of man and God in the following words:

Let us embrace upon the bed of tender flowers,
Which is be mind, with in the room of body (92)

The stanza quoted above is an excellent example of both motion and space where the motion is embracing and the space is room of the body. Maharishi uses the frame work of **body** as a space where one can meet God by a spiritual union of mind.

Blossom

Ontology is a branch of philosophy related with the nature of existence. Zoltan says that the cognitive job of this kind of metaphors "seems to be merely give and take new ontological status to general categories of abstract target concepts and to bring about new abstract entities... we conceive of our expression in term of objects, substances, and containers." (Zoltan; 2010 p.38) Maharishi explains mind as a container when he asked God to scent his mind with fragrance of consciousness. He says,

My mind has blossomed (then)
Scent it with thy fragrance and perfect it (90).

Mind is described here as a container which can be perfected and filled with the fragrance of divinity as a flower is scented with fragrance once it blooms. The metaphor used here is of a flower.

Up and Down

Orientational metaphors are related to basic human spatial orientation such as up down, centre and peripheral. These types of metaphors are universal. Upward orientation is considered positive and downward orientation is considered negative. In "Eight Stanzas to Sri Arunachla" Maharishi refers to the water rising **up** from the sea as clouds and then fall as

rains and run back to the sea in the streams (103). He refers to **the soul rising up** from body and becoming aware of divinity. The orientation refers to the upward movement of the soul.

“The Necklet of Nine Gems” which is titled metaphorically as it consists of nine stanzas. Maharishi uses this metaphor again in this poem when he says:

I fell into the deep sea called *Jagan Maya*
Was drowned (97).

The downward orientation refers to the human state of falling from the state of bonding with God and losing itself into worldly pursuits. The state prevents man from his union with God.

Dog

The domain of animals is another productive source domain to help understand metaphorical conceptualization of abstract ideas. He calls himself a dog who follows his master by his scent and ultimately tracks him to the home.

Am I then worse than a dog? Stead fastly will I seek Thee
and regain Thee, Oh! Arunachala! (86).

It is quite unusual in religious poetry that a saint would call him a dog. The contrast brings out the earthiness of metaphors and proves that his metaphors are rooted to the ground.

Honeybee

Make me instead a **honeybee** which (from the blossom of the Heart)
Sucks the sweet honey of Pure Consciousness ; then I shall have
deliverance. (99)

In the above cited stanza Maharshi makes use of metaphor of honeybee which sucks the flowers to make honey. However, man lacks the awareness of the divinity in him and is unable to attain the highest state of liberation. He requests God to make him a **honeybee** so that he may suck the sweet honey of pure consciousness and have deliverance.

Sun

Sun is a very common occurring metaphor in Indian religious tradition. It is a symbol of light of consciousness. The first five poems composed by Maharshi are titled *The Five Hymns to Sri Arunachla*. Arunachala means *Aruna*-light, *achla*-mountain. The refrain continues in almost whole of the poetry by Maharshi.

Dazzling Sun that swallowest up all the universe in
Thy rays open the lotus of my Heart, I pray,
Oh Arunachala!! (85)

The sun is worshipped in India by most of the Hindus as it gives light, life, awareness and is a source of existence of all life on earth. The sun is regarded holy in India whereas in West it is not so. The sun taken as a source of light is universal.

CULTURE SPECIFIC

Culture is the sum total of way of living, traditions and rituals followed by people living in a particular country or society. It is pertinent to note that there is a lot of difference in the culture not only at an inter-culture but intra-culture level. A very specific culture dominates

South India which is quite different from North India. So the culture not only varies within the countries but also within a country.

Banana Leaf

“A *Jnani* and His Body” is another very small poem. One lets go off the banana leaf after eating the food, the seer lets go his body similarly. In south India, banana leaf is used for taking food which is thrown away after use. Similarly a seer needs his body to have the food of working for others. When this work is over he discards his body. Once a seer realizes this Self, the body is of no need. Dr. T. M. P. Mahadevan in *Arunachala Siva* comments “The cessation or non-cessation of body has nothing to do with its release... In truth there is neither the body nor the world for him (the seer); there is only the Self, the eternal Existence (*Sat*), the Self-luminous Intelligence (*chit*), the unexcellable bliss (*Ananda*). (Mahaddevan : 2008 p.124-25). There is no ellipsis in the poem as can be seen from the use of “just as”.

Lotus

Another common metaphor used in Hindu religious philosophy is lotus. Maharshi also makes use of this metaphor quite frequently:

Oh, love, in the shape of Arunachala,
Can the lotus blossom without the sight of the sun? (98)

Only the sunlight can open a lotus—the symbol of non-attachment and beauty. A lotus can preserve its beauty even in muddy water. A person living in the pool of worldly activities can remain detached from the same if he reaches the ideal pristine state of self. A heart that opens up to the God’s grace remains untouched from the vagaries of the world.

Strumpet

“Strumpet mind” refers to the mind wandering in different directions like a female prostitute. (83). Strumpet belongs to the category of culture specific categories. It is a compound word consisting of nouns where one noun works an adjective to another noun. What is fascinating is that a metaphor can conceptualize in just two words; the contiguous words have their role in preparing the context however.

The strumpet mind will cease to walk the streets if
only she find Thee. Disclose thy beauty then and hold her
bound, Oh Arunachala! (83)

As soon as she finds someone to get support, the search comes to an end. Thus mind also wanders in many directions. Once it reaches its source, it becomes peaceful.

Poppadum

Poppadum is a food item used as an accessory to the main course in South India. “*The Song of Poppadum*” is an exquisite example of how ideas take shape in the form of conceptual metaphors in a particular culture. When Maharshi was living in Virupaksha cave, his mother did most of the cooking. One day she asked him to help in making *Poppadum*- a thin cake prepared from black gram flour. By giving instructions to his mother under the pretext of making *poppadum*, Maharshi asked his mother to experience the truth of Being-Awareness-Bliss. Metaphor of comparing this purely physical exercise related with cooking to a pure bliss of *Brahman* in its infinite silence runs throughout the poem. Preparing poppadum is wholly a South Indian concept. Black gram is ego, quern is the quest for wisdom, juice of

tamarind is holy company, cumin is control of mind, pepper is self-restraint and salt is non-attachment. After grinding all these in the mortar of Heart and grinding with pestle of mind, one needs to pound with 'I' and roll it with a pin of stillness. The frying is to be done in the ghee of 'Brahman' in the pan of infinite silence. Whatever comes out is the abiding *poppadum* of self -true and imperishable.

Take the black-gram, ego-self,
Growing in the fivefold body-field
And grind it in the quern,
The wisdom-quest of 'Who am I?' (133-34)

He instructs his mother to put the *poppadum* in the ghee of *Brahman*, held in the the fire of knowledge and transmuted in infinite silence.

Amlak

Amlak is another food item used extensively all over India. It is a gooseberry very sour in taste but extremely nutritious. Maharshi uses this food item for heart and self. In the poem Self-Knowledge, he calls self as real as the *amlak*, In India, it is used in Ayurveda and is said to have medicinal properties for many ailments of body. Maharshi expresses the Self-realization as easy as *amlak* whose worth is not known to many people.

Lo, very easy indeed.
Even for the most infirm
So real is the Self
That compared with it the *amlak*
In one's hand appears a mere illusion. (134)

The Marital Garland

Maharshi wrote a verse in God's praise and gave it a name of marital garland of letters for Arunachala—the God. It is the custom in Hindu marriages for a bride and a bridegroom to exchange garlands. The act symbolizes the union of two persons physically, mentally and spiritually. Maharshi invokes:

Gracious Ganpati with thy (loving) hand bless me,
that I may make this a **marital garland** of letters
worthy of Sri Arunachala, the bridegroom! (82)

The idea runs throughout the poem in such beautiful expressions—"honour me with the union with thyself", "tear off these robes, expose me naked, then robe me with thy love", "Enfold me body to body, limb to limb," and "Espouse me, I beseech Thee". The metaphor of marriage runs throughout the poem. Towards the end of the poem, the implied comparison of the metaphor of marriage becomes more explicit "let this mind now wedded to the world be wedded to perfection". The conceptual metaphor of marriage continues as we move further "let us embrace upon the bed of tender flowers, which is mind, within the room of the body..., Oh Arunachala!" (82-94) the metaphor of marriage enters into the realm of spirituality where one seeks ultimate union of soul with God. The union of marriage surpasses time and space. The metaphor of marriage is embedded in Indian psyche, thought and experience and is treated sacred. It is from these conventional images that Maharshi steps into the domain of conceptual metaphors.

CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said that Maharshi's poetry reveals both universal and the culture-specific metaphors. When the metaphorical conceptualization displays conventional mechanisms of thought which are basically same everywhere, the resulting metaphors are universal. When human brain works on experiential basis, the primary metaphors thus generated are similar in most of the languages. Metaphors related to directions, basic emotions, time and space are almost alike in different languages. The same holds true for Maharshi's poetry as seen in the metaphors of up and down, animal domain and plants. However other metaphors in Maharshi's poetry vary both at the level of inter-culture in view of the diversity of cultures of different countries for example, Marital Garland and Lotus and at the level of intra-culture as perceived by the difference in cultures within India itself, for instance, banana leaf and *poppadam*. Whereas universal metaphors embody the deep import of vast expanse of meanings in Maharshi's spiritual poetry, the cultural variation in his metaphors add a distinct flavor which otherwise would remain elusive. Maharshi Ramana's poetry opens boundless possibilities to be explored further in the above cited categories as metaphors in poetry continue to surprise us by their depth, variety and richness.

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