

Achieving Cosmopolitanism through Art: Evaluation of the Poetry of Rita Dove

Sukanta Roy

Research scholar

Department of English

Visva-Bharati

Abstract: The idea of cosmopolitanism is not only to live in harmony among the diversity but celebrate that diversity as an opportunity for variety of experience. Rita Dove, an African American poet suggests that the world has suffered enough for being insensitive, cruel, violent and angry. It is time to forget and forgive those who abused people in order to gain selfish propaganda. However being cautious she also advocates that one must find a balance between violence for defence and violence for violence. For her the art is the best medium to promote peace because from the beginning it has been uniting people among diversities. Art can not merely foster peace but can create it through its sheer ability.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, harmony, Non-violence, art, Rita Dove

Cosmopolitanism is an ideology that human beings live in a society based on certain shared ideals. It is inherent in the idea of cosmopolitanism that all the boundaries and borders that we perceive or create and use only to feel more secure and make an identity based more on shared experience in life actually hinder us from coming together in that natural shared society. It says that all the animate or inanimate objects or non-objects have the same root of origin therefore they all are inherently interconnected. The shape and the differences that we acknowledge today are external differences but in its essence they all are the same. In my reading in one level cosmopolitanism would want to find out all the borders and in the next level it would try to cross those boundaries in order to engage critically with it only to find a kinship among them. The primary driving force of cosmopolitanism is to be more tolerant about the 'Other' culture or the non-self, and secondly an eagerness to find peace, coexistence and harmony among diversity through agreement. Rita Dove, once a Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress and of Virginia, and the Pulitzer Prize winner poet, perhaps believes that while human society has so disintegrated and fragmented that it is now almost impossible to unite; but the only possibility that still humanity has, is through art which has no boundary from the beginning. Amid the chaos of selfishness and paranoia of the

modern capitalist world only art can play the role of saviour, being the medium of communication among the dispersed and quarrelling races on earth.

According to Kwame Anthony Appiah cosmopolitanism not merely accepts diversity it also celebrates them because it is believed that the diversity which can be seen as 'foreign' is not a threat but rather a source of surplus knowledge. Here the differences of other communities are taken as opportunity rather than hindrance. It not just comes from mere acceptance of diversity but requires more openness to embrace the other as favourable. Humanism also talks about the acceptance of diversity because the essential unity among all the human beings in the world is the idea that before all the distinctions to separate them, they all are human. Appiah differentiates between humanist approach and cosmopolitan approach to literature by saying that humanists are concerned about the agreement and acceptance of 'other' with the 'self', therefore humanism is accommodating the differences. Whereas, cosmopolitanism not only accepts those differences but understands and celebrates the scope this acceptance of diversity can open up for larger benefit of humanity.

The Humanist requires us to put our differences aside; the cosmopolitan insists that sometimes it is the differences we bring to the table that make it rewarding to interact at all. That is, of course, to concede that what we share can be important, too; though the cosmopolitan will remind us that what we share with others is not always an ethnonational culture. (Appiah: 639)

The word acceptance is a tricky word. That is because it is related to human psychology; which means when a person accepts something it gets a place and space in that person's heart and s/he doesn't need any external force to nurture it and sometimes to get new ideas out of it. In contrast to this liberal side of cosmopolitan approach it is the same policy of acceptance by which psychological colonialism works and by and by every other kind of colonialism. Psychological colonialism is when a person accepts that s/he is so less dignified that s/he needs someone as master who would guide him/her in every respect. European empiricism had been thriving because they successfully convinced the colonised that they needed the European masters to be civilised. In Cosmopolitanism there is no hierarchy and everyone gets equal position. Therefore to have a cosmopolitan atmosphere people must decolonise their mind that in this world no one is privileged. Only after that they can feel the vive of cosmopolitan togetherness. They must accept that in the world of creation they are as worthy as the people who for centuries claimed to be superior. Hence this acceptance self awareness is the only way out of that colonialism and any other kind of self imposed ignorance. It depends on how one convinces oneself by using reasons on each side and moreover which way one feels more acceptable.

Primarily it is very difficult to imagine the idea of cosmopolitanism or the experiences of cosmopolitanism or the world of cosmopolitanism because we have been growing up in a society, which is ruthlessly compartmentalised, ignorantly categorised, shamelessly divided

into several fragments in order to maximise the gain or benefit by the certain privileged people who are hungry of power, fame, glory and money. This is why particularly we need more cosmopolitan approach to our lives to mend the damages we have hurled upon ourselves. For the lives of African American people the past had been scarred by slavery and the damage is irreparable. Yet in answer to violence, more violence cannot bring any good. The choice is hard and options are limited, whether to live in the realm of vengeance to the past scars or being cautious live in the present. Defending one from severe violence and hurling back the same violence towards them is not the same thing. Martin Luther King being an advocate of non-violence movement, influenced by Gandhian philosophy, adhered to preach non-violence amid the American Civil Rights Movement (1954 – 1968). However he had not followed Gandhi blindly. He understood the socio-political differences between Indian situation and the American one and therefore his non-violence was a complex one. In the context of cosmopolitan approach towards violence as hurled by the people who use it to keep the status quo of staying in power and the people who defend themselves and sometimes attack back as to feel victorious or to feel important, it is necessary to understand the differences between those two approaches. There cannot be any guideline where to keep the balance yet one must find a balance in order to destabilize the chaos and initiate betterment of the entire society. Martin Luther King showed a good example of using non-violence to achieve the rights for the oppressed African American people. However he also accepted the requisite violence in some particular situation. Adam Roberts writes in his essay “Martin Luther King and Non-Violent Resistance” about the same duality of violence and Non-violence in the Non-violence movement which can be seen as necessary for even reaching a standpoint to achieve cosmopolitan worldview.

Although Martin Luther King opposed the use of violence in politics generally, and although he opposed it strongly and eloquently in the struggle for civil rights, his was not an absolute ethical rejection of violence for all circumstances. He did slowly move towards the latter position, but his rejection of violence was never complete. King did not call on Negroes to renounce their right to defend their homes with weapons. (Roberts: 230-31)

In order to live peacefully one needs a fine balance not only between violence and non-violence but also between past and present. That is because one must need to feel the equality among diversity. One finds the root, association of self in the tradition one has grown up with. One may feel, sometimes a distant relationship, find some connection in distant time which s/he never was familiar with. This familiarisation may not be the same with the tradition that s/he has grown up. The African Americans finds their roots in African culture. This is the affinity, desire, eagerness that one feels for another one. The commonality between human being, friendship, love and attachments are the emotions for which one does not need a particular, essential root like race, gender, nationalism. It is the inherent humanity the integrity of the ‘humanhood’ (if I am allowed to say this) that makes us peaceful and happy. It is like one may love one’s own self yet some times or the other s/he loves another

person. There can be some things familiar, and some unknown, some similar and some contrary, yet the love grows. That does not mean that same love would never soar but we find love in many ways of life. Dove searches for the African American root in African culture, Southern plantation, slavery; the blues, jazz, the oral culture, the previous African American artists and critics yet at the same she does not reject the Greek myths, American and European myths, their literati, their culture and tradition on the basis that they are also human endeavour in the sphere of art. She considers herself an artist and not any sectarian propagandist who would choose the source of art by the idea of race, class, gender, place and many other means. It is like being a citizen of the world community irrespective of sectarian identities.

In the writings of Rita Dove the idea of cosmopolitanism is interesting to observe. Sometime she rejects the idea of “only black” of the Black Power Movement and Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. She also rejects the “only white” of the white, racist American naive or stark propagandist literature or society. She has a different sense of harmony which she believes can come through art because it has the unimaginable power to dissolve all the bars to make a better world for all of us.

The concept of harmony in diversity can be best described in the composition of music. An orchestra is only possible when all the keys work harmoniously with each other. The perfect combination is the key to a successful and beautiful musical achievement. In the poem ‘Robert Schumann, Or: Musical Genius Begins with Affliction’ Dove points out the similar ideas that musical symphony can be achieved when they are played accordingly.

Symphony in A, Phantasiestucke
Concerto for Piano and Orchestra
in A minor, Opus 54: the notes
stack themselves onto the score-sheets
like unfamiliar furniture, the music
pulls higher and higher, and still
each phrase returns to A
no chord is safe from A
Years before, in a room with delicate chairs,
He was happy. There were no wretched sounds.
He was Adam naked in creation,

Starting over as the sky rained apples.

(Dove: 14-15)

The Creation remains on the core of everything in the world and within it there is a perfect harmony and pattern. This is why everything must always meet, at one time or the other, in the point of 'A', which is the point of 'Art', the point of harmony. The unfamiliar, the alien can be seen as hostile and it separates itself from its origin. Thus a feud and dissimilarity can destroy that creation even before beauty can take birth. By resolving that feud the artist can create a true piece of art. This is the aesthetic sense of art that pleases cognitively or by any other means. Moreover by this aesthetic sense the artist also creates himself/herself by discovering his/her self. When the artist discovers himself/herself through his/her creativity it becomes the triumph of art itself. That artist is devoid of all the diversities and sectarian hostilities not because the artist ignores all the differences and rejects them but being just the opposite h/she accepts all and rejects nothing. S/he is an artist who has shredded all the unnecessary ideas that create a sense of superiority over others and ends up hating the 'others' else and thereby taking or accepting the new identity based on truth.

As it is true that the Civil Rights Movement had a great impact of Non-Violence Movement, yet another of its wing, the Black Arts Movement of the sixties, was a proponent of sectarianism in the sense that it wanted to project the idea "Black is beautiful" so much that it ended up hating anything white. Rita Dove was against any kind of sectarianism and she did not support some of the ideals of the famous Black Arts Movement. One of the major contributors and supporters of Black Arts Movement was Don L. Lee or better known as Haki Madhubati whom Dove criticizes for being a separatist in the poem 'Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream'. She mocks its ideal that hatred always needs propaganda and when that immediate necessity ends the entire movement loses its relevance. There is no need to live in the past hatred when one can live in the happiness of the present, yet accepting, remembering and respecting the sacrifices of the older generation.

He comes toward me with lashless eyes,
Always moving in the yellow half-shadows.
From his mouth I know he has never made love
To thin white boys in toilet stalls. . .
Among the trees, the black trees
Women in robes stand, watching They begin
To chant, stamping their feet in wooden cadences

As they stretch their beaded arms to him;
Moments slip by like worms.
“Seven years ago. . .” he begins; but
I cut him off: “Those years are gone—
What is there now?” He starts to cry; his eyeballs
Burst into flame.

(Dove: 18)

Dove finds that the reason behind the problem of black slavery and the submersion of an entire race into the oblivion is the stereotype of black people as ignorant, evil, monstrous and so on. It is the misjudgement and at the same time selfishness of one human being for another that is at the core of it. If that misdeed has been a crime, re-doing the same misdeed, while trying to avenge the same is not a wise idea. Just as war can never bring peace, and violence can never amend the broken relations. So hating white people because they are white is the same thing as hating black people for their skin colour. If they hate white skinned people then they would commit the same crime against which they are fighting. Hatred can only foster hatred. This is why she mocks the attitude of hating the white people for being white irrespective of and not concerning about that person's actual quality. It is very difficult to digest the age old injustices yet to approach for friendship is always a better idea. In order to prove an upper hand she argues who else can sacrifice the intense satisfactory revenges for the racial crimes but those children of Africa who had suffered and endured the Middle Passage and kept their identity in all the diversities? Forgiveness is a virtue, of course, keeping one's self respect and integrity intact. What happened had happened. None can bring back the actual past to amend the wrong. Hence not living in the anger of past it's always better to try to make the future better. The similar attitude can be found in another poem 'The Cold Within' by James Patrick Kinny.

Six humans trapped by happenstance
In bleak and bitter cold.
Each one possessed a stick of wood
Or so the story's told.

Their dying fire in need of logs
The first man held his back.
For on the faces around the fire
He noticed one was black.

[...]

The black man's face spoke revenge
As the fire passed from his sight.
For all he saw in his stick of wood
Was a chance to spite the white.

[...]

Their logs held tight in death's still hands
Was proof of human sin.
They didn't die from the cold without
They died from the cold within.

(“Cold Within”: *Wikipedia*)

This famous poem talks about the human hostility against each other and how this selfishness and rivalry would lead to common destruction and loss. None can deny and no one should deny the centuries of injustices faced by the black people but one must learn from it to create a better atmosphere for living on earth. However one must think beyond the immediate revenge and try for long term better relations. They must try to live as friends because it would be foolish to die ‘from the cold within’ while together we can fix the fissures.

For Dove the singularity of art is more important than racial insistence on hating other. In an interview given to Claire Schwartz, when she was asked about the poem “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee in a Dream”, she told her that the Black Arts Movement was “artistically compromising.”

It's necessary that blackness be part of the national conversation, but the Black Arts Movement's insistence on projecting only certain aspects of black life was limiting if you wanted to talk about the complexity of being black or explore the negative spaces of racial identity – feeling of inferiority, beauty standards – this was sometimes shot down as being “not black enough” or “What do you want to do that for? That'll only give them ammunition.” “Them being the white establishment. SO, for me the Black Arts Movement was artistically compromising.” (Schwartz: Np)

Dove confirms she was not opposed to it but it was not “her” movement. She did not believe in the ideals of the Movement. Even within the poem she creates a dream setting and therefore an imaginary Don L. Lee so that the poem would not become a propagandist criticism of Don L. Lee or for that matter a criticism of the Black Arts Movement. She makes an artistic opposition of the ideals of Don. L. Lee. This is how Dove reinterprets and recreates historical moments and ideas in artistic way. She recreates and that creation is art. To resolve

any confusion by art becomes her sole weapon. She possibly believes that in this cruel world of selfishness only art would unite the world community and thus be the saviour for all of us.

For some critic, Dove's attitude of tolerance and acceptance may interpret as cowardice and escapism. However she is not an escapist or opportunist that she is using or rather abusing all the spheres to gain favour from everyone by not criticising the 'white' people. She descends or rather goes inwards back to slavery and African origin, yet while returning she gets everything. She is thankful to all the previous artists that she can now walk into the path that has been made by the struggles of the other. For her the Black Arts Movement and its "only black" were also necessary at that point of time, because black was abandoned, unrecognised and considered insignificant. Hence the fight was indispensable. However, one must think and understand the current scenario. If a more conjugal racial relation can be built why would the deprived not take initiative? One needs a break from that circle of slavery in art. The artists can only do it properly because art never hates anyone.

The Black Arts Movement generated the patriotic, nationalistic feeling. However all the alternative ideals, other views should be respected which Dove did. Sectarianism is necessary when one does not have any more choices in the large beneficially and selfishly motivated world; because that compartmentalisation or categorization with the zeal to prove one's own self, and his/her cultural magnificence would definitely become an impetus to form their own identity in that ocean of forceful 'otherness'. However for Dove one also must know where to pause. The war against that 'forceful other' world must be based on an ideal and the reason behind the polarities and the disrespect to each other should not be followed by the group that emerged from the new revolution against any kind of hatred. If the possibility occurs then one must not neglect the chance to amend the polarities for the mere sense of joy in vengeance. Hence one must not fall into the same trap of declaration of self superiority. The necessitated compartmentalisation in order to gain a place of empowerment, one community and culture has the ample possibility to fall for the same trap of the self delusional segregation between goodness and badness. One has to be conscious about that fact and s/he must act accordingly to get away from such delusion. The cosmopolitanism, the feeling of 'humanhood' among all by the use of the universal language of art is the best possible way to resolve all sorts of segregation. Thus Dove, while accepting all the diversities in the umbrella of cosmopolitanism she is actually elevating the position of art. Here 'art' becomes the liberator and saviour of cosmopolitan humanity.

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