

Through My Voice: A Critical Reading of Poile Sengupta's *Keats Was a Tuber*

Dr. Vineet Maxwell David

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow.

Abstract

The play *Keats Was a Tuber* by Poile Sengupta is one of the important works that the playwright is credited with and it corroborates to her rightful station in the history of contemporary Indian theatre. The play in its quest embodies a telling narrative on the idea of identity and its subsequent questions of acclaimed and unacclaimed voices within the constructs of language. The play, in its profound stagecraft furthers a fresh perspective on the way language redefines our capacity as human beings. The play purposefully takes within its ambit the role of “English language” and its impact at a deep-seated emotional, psychological internality aimed towards discovering autonomous identity claims. The paper examines the relational ties with English as a language and its historical referencing to colonialism and further advances to look forward to its vibrancy in the experiential realm. The paper hopes to bring to light the significance of the art of theatre that Poile Sengupta brings to play. It is the voice of the character of the “speaker” in the play who acknowledges the act of knowing English, yet she resists its bindings of colonial inheritance. For a playwright like Poile Sengupta, the momentousness of originating a female experience, and through ‘her’ voice brings to life a creative passion in the strongholds of theatre, is also an idea that the paper puts forth. The paper hopes to enliven and deliberate upon the finer nuances of the play in its workings of academic criticism and also probes into the subtleties of dramatic art that is often aimed towards transformation and not to leave the audience with a passive story. The paper also dwells upon a looking into the role of theatre posing important questions about the profundity of theme, characterisation and the establishment of ideas that the playwright nurtures through her dramatic art.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Identity, Politics of Language, Gender, Dismantling of Stereotypes

Embodying an idea succinctly proclaimed in the significance of the title, *Keats Was a Tuber* by Poile Sengupta, enshrines a profound reflection on the unfinished worded idiom is interestingly played out in the reflective unfolding of the appellation. The play deliberates upon a contemporary debate of how English as a language found its way through time and history and evokes uneasy memories of a colonial enterprise, which thereupon worked towards an alteration of life that it came to hold in its sway. With the gradual impressions of time and its forward movement, English as a language found its settlement in the common sensibility that gradually impressed upon an affinity, making its way through time and space.

The play *Keats Was a Tuber* was first performed on 18th January, 1997 and is a two-act play. The unfolding of the plot and its dramatic design is emblematic of a serious discourse that the play initiates and comes to its realisation in the profundity of the occasion, where the voice of a character called “A WOMAN” fills the initial emptiness and silence of the stage. Her proclamations are set in the unfolding of the opening act which begins “...in total darkness except for a single spot downstage right. A WOMAN (about thirty-five) is seen addressing an unseen audience” (Sengupta 145). Her entrée onto the scene is more in the likeness of a resonance, a clarion of intent and yet brooding in its nature. Her voice echoes an articulation suffused with the exasperation of a nostalgia, vociferously bespoken in the restlessness of the acquired English lexicon that has coloured her imagination of today. As she says, “It is my privilege to speak to you as a teacher of English from India and to share with you my thoughts and experiences” (Sengupta 145). For her, this remains a moment of acknowledgment and deep speculation that extends in the larger questions that the play seems to position. She categorically puts it “English is not my language. It is not the language that

my grandparents and parents speak at home. In fact, I do not think I knew anything of English before I went to school”. (Sengupta 145)

Her voice remains singular in the context of the play, as the voice of a “teacher of English”, whose affinity with English language has been a gradual realisation, as she articulates:

English is now the language of my thoughts, it is the language of my reason, the language I use for loving. My perceptions are finer; my judgements more subtle, the range and depth of my emotions seem to be much greater in this language than in any other. What is it then that I and all those like me have inherited? A language, merely? A mode of communication that is functional in many, perhaps in most, parts of the world? Or have we inherited an entire civilisation, an alien sensibility that has seduced us from the culture to which we were born? Have we been enchanted so as to wander forever homeless?
(Sengupta 145)

The initial conflict in the play is where the speaker profoundly resists and questions the indelible colouration of a sensibility overshadowed by an inert receiving of a foreign lexicon. Interestingly her presence is of “A Woman”. She comes across as someone whose claims to language are not peripheral but desires a passionate involvement with the English alphabet.

As a woman, she appears to hold a keen eye in her affirmative grasp of looking at language, especially English, where she sees herself in the act of originating ideas as seen working towards an epistemology, rather than to experience a sterile passivity of language. Her resistance, is in the likeness of an echo chamber that clamours opinion very much like what M. A. R. Habib in his book *A History of Literary Criticism*, mentions and elaborates

ideas enunciated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, where she in her statements talks about the idea of colonialism with reference to “subaltern studies” and especially with reference to her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” It is here that the mentioning of Spivak comes to light with reference to the play’s important theme and it is here where Habib says that Spivak, “addresses precisely this issue of whether peoples in subordinate, colonized positions are able to achieve a voice” (qtd. in Habib 748). Habib mentions, “In broad terms, Spivak sees the project of colonialism as characterized by what Foucault had called “epistemic violence,” the imposition of a given set of beliefs over another. Such violence, she says, marked the “remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other”.” (Habib 748)

The play’s merit profoundly upholds the writer’s dexterity towards conspicuously laying bare a layering of myriad interpretations. It is here that the questions about English as a language, bearing a colonial past is seen from a closer distance. The conflict that the play presents, has an aspect that has a similar ring of tone, as to what can be read in the book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*, where Pramod K. Nayar cites an idea about Postcolonial English and can be used as a reference point to extend the critical ideas that become prominent in the narrative:

Language and empires have always gone together. Colonization, requiring legal, social, and political control, is also an archivization project, to document, disseminate, and formulate rules, information, and policies. Often, colonialism’s drive to generate its own vocabulary and command and evacuate non-European languages of signification in official transactions mean that the natives were forced to speak the language of the colonizer. (Nayar 245)

The unravelling of the plot forebodes a rising conflict that the audience/readers are made to witness. There is a marked disquiet in the monologue of the character of “A Woman”, visible in her inaugural message. For her, the complexities of having learnt English as a language of acquisition is looked upon as something that has still not found a possessor, in whose possession it could be a part of one’s own intrinsic self. A similar idea could be mentioned, where Pramod K. Nayar is reflecting upon a quote by Raja Rao, who in his statement mentions,

One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us...Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. (1963:vii). (qtd. in Nayar, *Postcolonial* 247)

The inaugural unfolding and progression of the play focuses on a setting which takes place in “the shoddy staff room of a provincial college” (Sengupta 1.1.146) and it is here where the characters are introduced. What appears to be a simple story bringing to life a placid day to-day life experiences, interestingly has its deeper undercurrents reflecting upon the more profound complexities forwarded in the literal exegesis of the narrative. The playwright impacts a deeper sensibility, one that resonates with the complex and constant interactions that take place between and amongst individuals. The characters are introduced as teachers and as students of English who in their academic pursuits have embraced their own unique relationship with English. In the given circumstance, the play apparently draws

forth upon the idea of how English language and the literature produced in that medium effectuates a certain shaping of one's creative imagination.

As the play is situated in the environs of a "staff room" of a provincial college, the significance of its spatial location brings to focus a world that is active in the everyday transactions of a college life, apparently made significant in the regular humdrum of activities, giving importance to the space and its location as a site of enquiry. However, its profundity also bespeaks a focussed study of characters, who in their varied attitudes have come to occupy differing positions as stakeholders. As for the major characters who are in the role of teachers, they envision the unfolding of life situations in providing meaning to the life of their pupils. It is here that the play positions its vital contestations of recognising the presence of the English language and its evoking responses that lead to its relational dynamics in the contemporary social milieu, is a scope that is integral to the readings of the play.

The inaugural opening of Act One takes place with the characters of Mr. Iyer, Miss Sarala, Mrs. Nathan as interesting characters, who can be clearly identified as individual archetypes and who in their roles as academics are seen deeply involved in the tedium of daily assignments and tasks. There is a certain nuanced innocence in the way the characters engage with life values, especially in their roles as teachers who constantly endeavour to engage with their pupils towards affecting a profound change that can be instilled in them in their aspirational quests as youth.

What begins as a light-hearted exchange of words, appear to bear a strong influence on each other. It is Mrs. Nathan, who reveals that the department of English will have Raghu as a new teacher, who is to be accommodated as a stop-gap arrangement in lieu of a Mrs. Kichu, who is on leave. However, the complexities of events start taking place as soon as

Raghu makes an appearance. Raghu, as a character is Mrs. Nathan's nephew and is a young man eager to dole out responsibility as a new teacher in place. He is introduced as a man who is "...about twenty-five, but looks younger and with the kind of freshness that some men retain all their lives. The uncharitable would call him immature, childish, but a kinder judgement would be that he seems to carry about him the conviction and the excitement that he has been born to change the world" (Sengupta 1.1.153). The apparent ideas that are discernible in the play are also to gauge human responses to language, especially English and how its workings are mobilised at a generational stratum, where the role of the characters of Raghu and Damini come into play. They are juxtaposed with other characters who are much older and are often found to be rigid in their opinions.

Raghu is young and a rebel, for him the bindings of ideas in the way students' exposure to English studies clashes with his own ideas. He favours a conceptual thinking about English language and its expressions in the medium of a literary flourish as to not to abide by the strictures of an archaic linguistic ventriloquism, which he is not ready to perform as a young teacher. He is filled with ideas to "change the world", much like Damini, a young motivated student whose youth is a great encouragement for her to put herself in the process of intellectual dialectics with her teachers. She questions and interrogates her relationship with the discipline of her choice and the relation that she can establish. She expresses her views to her teachers, especially Mr. Iyer - one that plays on a tangent that has personal overtones. She recounts her experiences as a young student and her perceptions of reading English fictional stories and its bearings upon personal lives. She also refers to the joyous mystique of reading a poem and its ability to transport people's imagination to realms that are ennobling to the human mind. A sheer fantastical quality that literature has in a way to strengthen the inner capacities of intellectual vigour and give the required understanding

towards a fulfilling inner experience, is a special idea that one finds in her discourse as a young woman.

Raghu, on the other hand has a motivated sense of empathy, which underscores an altruistic quality within him to empower the not so privileged. He especially helps Ramanan, “who cannot speak but can hear perfectly well”, (Sengupta 1.1.149) and teaches him the skills of writing in English. Ramanan is positively forced towards overcoming the limitations of disability, especially the curtailment of speech, only to be empowered in the act of using language to “communicate with the rest of the world” (Sengupta 2.2.204). In this way the clear demarcations that the play portrays indicate characters’ ideological bent that influences them to be either anxious to disturb the status quo or are the ones who resist and question the veracity of their choice and make ideas work through language. Raghu and Damini as individuals are guided by a strong desire to voice their opinions and are considered to be trailblazers, standing on a different tangent from the older generation in the play.

The play serves to put up rising conflicts that find mention in the developing progression of the plot. Raghu serves to underscore his presence as an ideologue, who in his opinion differing from that of the other “staff members”, tries to upend the stereotypes of conventional ways of thinking, especially when it comes to sharing his views on the use of pedagogical markers to enunciate an inner experience in English, as ways of teaching young people.

Raghu is a clear point of dissension with his aunt and his fellow colleagues. Mention should be made that Raghu’s character portrayal comes across as that of an individual who is quite assertive in nature and doesn’t feel shy to be at loggerheads with the established views of the department. It is his constant probing into the ways of teaching English Literature that demands a renewed demonstrative outlook. He is what he thinks, that ideas need to be

enunciated in language and especially English, where a more independent view of the individual could be realised.

Nathan. And I beg of you, don't give them grand lectures on communism and Karl Marx and what not.

Raghu. Why shouldn't I do that? I am expanding their minds, helping them grow, that's what teaching is about. Real Teaching. Not this cramming and vomiting out that you and your colleagues expect them to do. Memorise! By heart! Mug up! (Chants) Keats was a tuber... Keats was a tuber... Keats was a tuber... culosis patient... culosis patient... Is that all you can tell them about Keats? That he had tuberculosis? (Sengupta 1.2.168)

As a character, Raghu's reflection on perceptions of language and its coherence in the literary imagination demands a necessary change that needs to be inculcated as a rational reflection on literature. He probes into the necessity that ideas in a language should find an autonomous assertion through individuals' critical reception to the nuances of language rather than staring at the hollowness of a blank expression devoid of the claims of the intellect. He shares an opinion that the values of a rational worldview need to be upheld and language shouldn't be a mere embellishment but a facilitator of a progressive idea that should be put into action in the active reflex of the language.

The play critically examines a human situation where the speaker of English language desires an experience of the inner longings of the heart, that is often times eschewed in the mechanical perceptions of the artificiality of language. An instance that promotes this idea is where Damini, a student mentions:

Damini. Why should I study something written by some Englishman who is talking about some Bridge in London that I have never seen? If I write a poem

‘Upon Howrah Bridge’, will it be included in the English syllabus? (Sengupta 1.1.163)

Her claims to her ideas are her own, reminiscent of the spirit of an awakened feminist voice with which she speaks and argues. She does not only question the orthodoxy of repetitive ideas but asserts herself in the possibilities of lexical dynamics exercised through her interventions, bringing forth an independent female experience.

Iyer. (Gently.) You have opted for a study of English literature, so you have to read the work that English minds have produced.

Damini. I know. I used to be very silly those days... . But I know something else too, sir. I...I have realised that literature goes beyond the question of language. It has to do more with... with experience, I think. With what a poet or somebody with that kind of mind sees or feels. Wordsworth saw something utterly beautiful and he wrote about it in the only language he knew. (Sengupta 1.1.164)

The students’ remarks are a way of telling that the experience of literary language and especially one that is a part of ones’ inner reflection has to be a symbiotic organic whole, a synthesis of receiving, absorption and transformation all in tandem as a holistic experience. Her astuteness is also marked in the way she questions the dominance of certain prevailing ideas, leading to which a parallel can be drawn with Pramod K. Nayar mentioning Annette Kolodny’s views talking about the way feminist criticism looks into, “...an attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within a literary inheritance: the consequences of that encoding for women - as characters, as readers, and as writers’ (1989:162)” (qtd. in Nayar, *Contemporary* 94). Her remarks are directed towards the need for the assertion of women’s presence in the play, and also that she hones

individualistic opinion as a woman, who transacts with the ideas within language on an intellectual plane. Her views are also reminiscent of Gerda Lerner's views, where she says, "Perhaps the greatest challenge to thinking women is the challenge to move from the desire for safety and approval to the most "unfeminine" quality of all - that of intellectual arrogance, the supreme hubris which asserts to itself the right to reorder the world" (Lerner 228). Her character is also emblematic of a type that the playwright uses to take forward her views as the voice of youth.

Poile Sengupta allows her audience to have a relook at the already familiar spaces and "defamiliarise" the ideas of looking at the world anew. Her motivation has the strength of the female experience and the many voices that spring from the narrative, are varied and consist of a conglomeration of ideas that reflect personal subject positions and personal ideological proclivities. Some characters remain affixed to an antiquated outlook, while the others undergo a transformative phase. The profound cogitations by the "Woman" on stage reflects upon the trajectory of English language as seen through the lens of history, as she reminisces the thriving of English as a colonial construct built for its ulterior aims. However, the play focusses on the emerging dimensions that deal with the idea of English to move away from the fuzziness of its past historical entanglements and to allow original aspirations to thrive in the claims of language.

The "college" and its spatial representations allow for a more contemporary dialogue voiced in the articulacy of language to take place through the narrative. The play challenges the stereotypes of artificial engagements with language and constantly dilates the scope of identity probing as part of the narrative. What began as a reflective brooding on the past by the speaker, has its new claims in the acts of possession of language, especially by the portrayal of a minor character, Ramanan, whose arrival in the 'language of not his knowing',

has finally been made possible. The play also instils inspirational ideas about social change that could be made possible through an acquirement of voice in language, honed and curated in the affirmative realisations of oneself. The “voice of the woman” is not a gendered voice alone but is a voice in continuum, in transition, escaping the old outdated strictures of colonialism and setting itself free, not experiencing a closure but surges ahead as a “travelling” in the accounts of an acclaimed voice.

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