

Indian Poetry Part – 1
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Length: 40:21

Hello, and welcome to this session. In today's session we will be looking at Kedarnath Singh's 'Where Would I Go'. So that poem, 'Where Would I Go' would be the centerpiece of today's discussion. But towards the end of it, we will be comparing 'Where Would I Go' with other poems, say by Salma, and some of the tribal poems for this course. Thank you.

Hello, and welcome to this session on regional poetry in translation. Today, we are going to look at Kedarnath Singh's 'Where Would I Go'. Let me first read the poem for you. "Where would I go, I shall only stay here like a handprint on a door just to be there. I will be hidden in the smell of a suitcase sitting on an old ledge. I will remain buried in a register book under the letters where my permanent address is written. Or if I can, I will be the bell the donkeys wear, carrying salt up steep slopes, or a nail, on a boatman's bridge. Where would I go? You will see, everything will stay as it is, only my routine will change. When the birds return in the evening I will also return, and in the morning when they fly, I will fly away with them." So this is the poem. Now I am going to invite Mrudula to summarize the poem. So that is how we begin to analyze a poem, we begin with the contents. So what, in essence, is the poem about?

Student: The poem is about displacement. When you read the poem, you understand that the poet, it is in the form of a dramatic monologue. He is talking to somebody saying that he does not want to move from this place. And he is trying to establish his identity, saying that he is like the handprint on the door, he is like the smell on the suitcase and, and he is like the letters that are buried in a register book. And he also compares himself with that of a bell that the donkeys wear, and all such things. So we understand that there is a ripple that is created in his mind. So probably he is very anxious about the things that is happening around, so he is just trying to assert his identity saying that, I am not going to go anywhere. I am going to stay here.

Professor: Okay. Let me just summarize in one line. This poem is about a person who does not want to leave. He does not want to go away. And he tries to respond to that crisis; where would I go, I cannot go anywhere, I will stay here. So his unwillingness to leave this world is the subject I

would think of this particular poem. Now let us talk more about the narrator, who is the narrator, what kind of a person he or she is, is it a he or a she?

Student: Since it is written by Kedarnath Singh we can, we can assume that it is a male narrator. But it can be a he or she. It can be interpreted in any way and, and he talks about how he wants to stay here.

Professor: Yeah, yeah. So let me just go back. The narrator is not the same as the writer, we need to understand that.

Student: Yes.

Professor: Yeah, there is no equivalent between the speaker of a poem and the writer of the poem. So that is something we need to understand but we kind of tend to assume that if it's by a female poet, the speaker is female, and vice versa. We've got to find out clues about the gender, the class and other contexts for the speaker from the details of the poem.

There is no gender specific referencing within the text of the poem 'Where would I go'. But there are certain details in the poem which suggest that it's most likely to be a male. For example, the most important detail that kind of indicates that this figure is possibly a male is in that reference to a register book.

Student: Yes.

Professor: 'I will remain buried in a register book under the letters where my permanent address is written.' So a register book is an official document. And it is usually the male of this species, who is found in register books usually, statistically speaking, across the ages. It is highly likely that it is a male who is, who is the person who has a permanent address, a permanent address. The female usually does not have a permanent address, usually. Let me just underline that, you know, idea, usually. So he is likely to be a man who is working, who has worked in institutions, so that his name is important enough to be recorded in a register book under the letters, perhaps the first letter of your surname and under that letter his permanent address is referenced. So this is a detail which suggests that possibly he is a male.

There are other details, the other details. Detail which is, you know, these are very subtle, subtle details which are interpreted by my reading to suggest that he is possibly male. Look at the material object bell, the bell, and, and the object is a nail, very hard, you know objects, nail, which is kind of supporting a structure, you nailed something together. You nail pieces together so that you can have a structure that can stand and do its work. So all these kind of rough, strong structures are associated with the male identities. It is even difficult to kind of, it is even perhaps difficult for a female to imagine such metaphors to describe, you know, her status, her place.

Student: Yes.

Professor: So it is a, it is a 'perhaps', I am constantly qualifying by saying, 'perhaps', 'likely', 'usually'. These are all qualifiers that I am using. I am not saying that a female cannot ever use such metaphors, I am saying this is the usual, you know, figurative tradition that we have seen over the years. So nail, bell, and look at the piece of burden, donkey carrying a load of salt, it is heavy duty work, a hard manual labor, and he is kind of associating him with that kind of labor. So these, these kind of labor, carrying, and these kinds of labors are associated with the masculine you know, aura, the masculine identities.

So these are some of the reasons which, which I think make us understand that the speaker is probably a male, most likely to be a male. Now, my second question is what are the other characters or things that you come across in the poem? And what kind of impact that those characters or things have on the meaning of the poem?

Student: When you read it, you understand that he is talking about his everyday experience in some way because when you see the pattern of this poem, he talks about, he talks, he first, he talks about the handprint. It is as if like, he is a working man. He, it is, he is talking about his entry into an office. Then he talks about the ledger.

That is where he, no, he talks about the suitcase secondly, and that is the thing that he carries. Then he talks about the register book and then he talks how he slogs like a donkey. And he talks about his burden of being the breadwinner. And so we understand that he is, he is the one who supports the family.

Professor: Let us just take a minute to reflect further. 'Where would I go, I shall only stay here like a handprint on a door just to be there.' Doors suggest domestic habitation; it can suggest in a professional institution, it can signify anything. It is just an entry. It is just a structure that allows you access. So we do not know what else is beyond that. But, but you very interestingly point out that you know, the second reference is to a suitcase and suitcase has its own associations with the professional world, the idea of travel, the idea of, kind of safe keeping records and things like possessions. I quite agree, I quite like the way you are, you are kind of connecting these two things. But I just want to bring your attention to this idea of 'just to be there'. I have my handprint on the door just to be there.

And, and I also thought that, you know, he has his handprint because he can. He has the power, the capacity to leave his handprint on the door. He has the power there, that is the subtext. And, and the very idea of leaving imprints, leaving your mark suggests, as I said, again, the idea of the power that you have to leave handprints, traces.

And it also suggests a kind of ownership. Ownership possession, you are successful enough, you are powerful enough to own things, materially or figuratively, that idea is there. 'I will be hidden in the smell of a suitcase, in the smell of a suitcase sitting on an old ledge.' Again, the idea of not leaving, I am there, at least my smell would be there, I will still be connected to that suitcase. I am not going away, within the smell, with, within that suitcase is a smell that belongs to me.

And the idea is that perhaps this is a, this is a person who is dead, but his spirit is still kind of revolving in a material world, in, in objects and, and in aromas, in flavors in the, you know, natural world. So he has left his handprint, he has left his smell within a suitcase which is long forgotten in an old ledge, but what is interesting to us, I think is the kind of objects that he brings up. The, the memory of this figure is associated with particular objects- not with domestic things not the kitchen equipment or with any ideas related to the kitchen, not with a domestic sphere, which is why I said there is no reference to, I think, at least to me, there is no kind of suggestion of the feminine world, at the back of this poem. It is not leading us there. We are outside of that feminine domestic sphere, aren't we?

I mean we can, we can, we can assume that he would have been the breadwinner, it is most likely that he would have been the breadwinner. But what is fascinating is that there is no reference to

his domestic sphere, which would have included a female identity at its center. Unlike the case with Dilip Chitre's 'Father Returning Home' where the entire poem is like seeing through the lens of a child, the child of a father, and the father figure.

So this is a very interesting point in that we do not get that private sphere at all and, and I just want to correct that point that you mentioned that 'I will be the bell that the donkeys wear'. He is not exactly the donkey, which is carrying that load of salt, but the bell, close but not the same. He is close to that manual labor, there is a subtle distinction. So he is the bell that the donkeys wear to make that noise for some kind of caution, whatever, for some kind of sign, and but he is not that donkey carrying salt. He is a nail, but he is not the boatman. He is a nail on the bridge, but not the boatman who is kind of associated with other kinds of labor. So he is part of that machinery, the machinery of the, of a particular class associated with labor. But, but he is not a, not a figure who is literally doing it because we, we can get a sense that he is perhaps a clerk or perhaps a person who has a desk job.

Student: Yes.

Professor: Because that idea of having permanent addresses suggest a particular kind of class for a, for the speaker. If you own a house with a door and you know, if you have an old ledge if you have a suitcase, then the association is that you are perhaps lower middle, class middle class. So, that kind of associated set of signification comes through. You know? What else were we going to talk about?

Now, what are the, so the things, the things that populate this world tells you about the nature of this world. So a door, a suitcase, an old ledge, a register book, letters, importance given to text and books as objects. And then bell, nail, and then we come to the natural world through that reference to the birds. So what he is trying to say is that I will be part of the material world as well as the natural world, so there is a kind of a dispersal, yeah. What do you think of the tone?

Student: I feel that it is very personal.

Professor: Yeah.

Student: And it is like he is asserting something.

Professor: Yeah,. Keep going.

Student: Because he compares himself with that of a handprint and as you said, the smell and even the letters, he is comparing himself with, he says that he will be buried in a register book under the letters, you say that, you see that there is a sense of inseparable, you, you cannot separate handprint from that of a door, you cannot, you know, separate smell from that of a suitcase.

Professor: Yes.

Student: He is so, he is blended with all these things so well, that you cannot separate him from it.

Professor: Yes, correct. So, I want to pick up on that word of assertion, there is assertiveness, there is an assertion, there is a declaration, a statement that I am not going anywhere, I will only stay, but it sends such a beautiful, you know, melodious, you know, set of words and ideas, that it's not jarring. You tend to kind of understand the longing of that spirit, the speaker's spirit who does not want to go away. But hidden in that kind of beautiful set of ideas is this very powerful assertion that, I am, I am here to stay in numerous ways, in multiple ways, like a handprint, like the smell, like, like the register book. Register book is pretty interesting because it gives you immortality, in some ways. It is, it is like almost Shakespearean in the claim that it makes as long as eyes can see and things like that. And so, he is kind of seeking immortality and that also makes us self-conscious in the sense that that idea is also textually, through the genre of a poem given to us. So, so double, you know, immortality there for you framed by this poem too, isn't it? So, 'you will see, everything will stay as it is.' Who is this 'you'? You will see everything will stay as it is. What is this 'everything', that is the question. I have two questions. Who is the 'you', and who is the 'everything'? What is the 'everything', yeah? So everything is all this, all this, the mundane, the ordinary, the routine, donkeys wearing bells and going up slopes and, and steep slopes, it is hard labour, steep slopes.

There is a, there is a repetition of that consonant 's'. Smell, suitcase, sitting, a steep slope. So that sound is, is repeated. It has a kind of a, a soothing, melodious, tone to it, doesn't it? It creates that mood, that lulling mood, putting us in comfort, isn't it? We, we will agree with whatever, we will accept his philosophy, isn't it?

Student: Yes, yes

Professor: 'Only my routine will change,' and we do not know what that routine is. 'When the birds return in the evening, I will also return. In the morning, when they fly out I will fly with them.' So you can see how that kind of transition is made from the material to the natural world. From doors and suitcases and, and register books to kind of flying with the birds, returning with the bird. So there is a, there is a movement there.

What further thoughts do you have? What about the structure of the poem? Do you have any thoughts about that? Where would I go is a refrain, the repetition of an idea of a particular set of words time and again in this poem.

Student: Yes.

Professor: So the title is repeated, where would I go, in the first line as well as the last, you know, just before the concluding stanza. And it is a rhetorical statement, isn't it? It is not really a question. There is no question mark at the end of that phrase 'where would I go'. It is just a statement; I am going to be here only, in this place. Nobody, nobody can shift me; push me out of this system. So that assertion, I think can be, is most likely to come from male psyche, you know, the idea of being in control, being everywhere. Being everywhere with the birds, with the donkeys, with, with smells. There is a kind of omnipotence.

Student: Yes.

Professor: Isn't it? That omnipresence and omnipotence is there. The omnipresence, omnipotence is an idea which I am using because of the power of this figure to go anywhere, be anywhere, that, that gives them a kind of a power. To be associated with, with you know, things like bridges, bridges which connects people, you know, which, which kind of displays the power of, of societies, the power to build something like that, regardless of the fact that it is small or medium sized or massive. It, it indicates the fact that you are capable of producing something, building something, being a part of something that can connect people, bridges, bridges, so all these, all these are associations of power. Not, not in a very manifest, aggressive, in-your-face, but these are subtle suggestions which indicate the, you know, the power of the speaker. Think about this poem and go back to see for example, Salma's 'Perspective'

Student: Yes.

Professor: Can you compare both, this world with that one? Perspective?

Student: In one sense, this poem talks about the mundane life and Salma so talks about that. And once you read it, this, read this one as a, as in the perspective of a man and that in the perspective of a woman, you understand the differences, the worldly differences in the kinds of things that they have to face day to day life, in their day-to-day lives. And, there is a sense of shock in that poem, but you do not find it here.

Professor: Yes, yes. Yeah

Student: Here, he is okay about everything.

Professor: Yes, yes absolutely, he is okay with the world.

Student: Yes, he is okay.

Professor: Right, he is okay with the world that is a very important distinction. And, and that kind of distinction is something you will realize, only when you put these two poems together and see the two worlds. In 'Where would I go' you do not see, as I said, the private world at all, the world of women, babies, children, domesticity, kitchen fire, whatever. You do not see that world at all. And it isn't that you should always bring in that world, but when you present your public world in this way, where everything seems to be fine, then you begin to wonder, because you have read other poems, you have come across other poems which talk about so many complexities in those kinds of worlds and then you begin to wonder. This is a person who is okay with, with the world he has occupied, and now it is, time has come for him to leave and he is not leaving.

And then you think about Salma, you think about the tribal women, you know, those tribal women who give birth and then who want to kind of use the birds as messengers to send a word to their relatives and demand what they are owed, perhaps as a ritual, perhaps as the gift. Remember the woman who has given birth to a son who wants saris, multi-colored saris, you think about that world and this world and, and there is such a chasm between the two. Okay, so go on what, what further comparisons would you find between 'Perspective' and this one?

Student: Again, this idea of birds recce in both these poems is there. In Salma's 'Perspective', that bat tells her who she is or like, she and that is like a sudden revelation for her. But here this, these

birds give him, it, he is associating it with freedom. He is associating, he says that he will fly in the morning, just like them or like when it is time for him to go back to his house; he will go back, like, just like how birds return to their house. So he is associating his life with that of birds, like he is comparing his life with that of birds, but so the idea is used differently with these two poets.

Professor: Yeah, yeah. So, let us, let us pick up on that use of the bird image in both these poems. There we have a bat; it is a shocking image to pick up on your earlier idea of shock in, in Salma's poem. It is a shocking image in the sense that birds are associated with something eerie, unpleasant, supernatural, associated with darkness, and gloominess and perhaps bad omen.

So bat has that kind of set of associations, unpleasant, negative associations, and here it is just birds in, in 'Where would I go' it is, it is a common bird. And if you look at that translation which is available online, we have a beautiful image of a bird, which has this morning sun as its backdrop, you can look go check it out online. It says three poems by Kedarnath translated. So it is a very positive image. It is an image of hope and optimism and joy and freedom.

So those are the kinds of associated images when you, when you kind of think about the birds in Kedarnath's 'Where would I go', the birds are free to come and go. The recurrence is natural, that is the way of life it is the natural order, the coming and going and the freedom and the joy. But that is not the case with Salma. The bats are staring at her and telling her that your life, your human life is upside down, topsy-turvy, just as we are. Just as the bats hang upside down in trees.

So the bat is kind of telling her that idea indirectly to that Salma, to that figure produced by Salma, a mother who is you know, struggling to take care of her child and also do some reading. So we have, you know, different connotations for birds in these two poems and the birds become a signifier of what is not right in Salma and what is kind of, you know, the way of life in 'Where would I go'.

Student: Yes.

Professor: So, that is a male world, everything is fine and dandy within the confines of 'Where would I go'. I am not saying that the male world is utterly without any kind of complexity problem and, and you know, issues. I am just saying the male world that we see within the text of 'Where would I go', is a non-problematic world in my reading. Yeah.

Student: But when you read it, you also understand that it is not a colorful world. It is, it is very, maybe I, when I read it.

Professor: No, no. Go on, go on.

Student: It is very, when I read it I felt like it is, for me I find it very boring.

Professor: Boring, yes. Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Student: It is as if, like he is existing and not living.

Professor: Very good. Okay. So, I mean, it is perfectly all right to have your reading of this poem in the way, you know, it, it makes sense to you. Fine. Yeah. It is melancholic. I could sense a bit of melancholia. And the melancholia for me arose from the fact that he is kind of looking back into the world, the material world, over which he hovers, he is hovering over that world, but he is not within it. So the idea that he has left that world, but is not completely away from it, he can look back and try to find his persona in such kind of handprints, and the old smell even in suitcases kind of makes us sympathize with the fact that he is not actively engaging with that material world. He is not literally part of the processes, he is there, but not functional, which connects with your idea of being bored.

You get the sense that perhaps he is not living, he is existing, it is quite all right to think that because he is not existing. He is not, he is not existing, because he is dead and gone. He is no longer part of the processes which is why he is perhaps associating himself with bells, not with donkeys, not with the boatman, not with the boat perhaps which is kind of moving through, moving across through us but perhaps with a nail which is just there, supporting. Not actively doing anything else, perhaps; I am just stretching this idea further and trying to see kind of, you know parallels with other images that come across. So you are quite right in a sense that there is a, there is a, there is a sense that this guy is not actively living but is just kind of being a spectator in some sense and being a spectator can sometimes be boring, you know, you want to do things, be a part of it to make things exciting for you.

So he is a spectator because he is, he is kind of, his time is over. Time for him to go, leave and, and that is what he does, by, you know, becoming a spirit that can come and go with birds. So he

has kind of transferred his spirit to the natural world in some sense. So what else Mridula? Any, any further comparisons with any of the poem that you can think about, that you have read for this course?

Student: Oh, with this course. When I read this, I felt like this persona can be compared with that of that, person of Tiresias that appears in Wastelands. But with other poems...

Professor: No, I am talking about regional Indian poetry. What about the other tribal poem 'Chill Out'? What do you think about the male speaker there?

Student: The male speaker it- that poem definitely talks about the male world, but he is happy about it.

Professor: Yes, yeah, yeah.

Student: He is very actively involved in the cultural practice and he, and but there is a, definitely you understand that there is a female figure and you understand that he does not want her to be an active participant in societal functions or like there is a clear cut boundary. But here that figure is absent, female figure is absent.

Professor: Yeah, yeah.

Student: And, but there you get this sense of happiness because he is practicing to play that bamboo flute, so songs that are definitely associated with happiness.

Professor: Yes. Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, we, we have discussed that poem earlier and, and we saw that, you know, it can be a, you know, it can be mock serious poem, it does not have to be taken as a really serious poem where the main speaker says just, just go away and do, you know, what whatever is suitable for you such as eating a chili or, or just, you know, something like that.

So, there the male speaker, as we saw, is trying to engage himself with the cultural practice of flute playing, and flute playing is important in the sense that music is important for the, you know, well-being of the community because common traditions common ideas, common values are kind of

channeled through this collective melody of the society, of the community. So, he has a very communal, a societal as well as a kind of a professional role to play.

And what is interesting about that point is that the female is not completely eliminated from the space of the text. In that point, we have a female speaker within the text of the poem and she is very overtly addressed, she is almost included. And there is a sense that yes, we need, we know that her demands are there, it will be taken care of, and she has to wait. So, that kind of impression is given in, in that poem.

Whereas in 'Where would I go' there is a 'you', there is a 'you', but we are not very sure about the gender of that 'you'. There is no other detail in this poem to suggest that it is a she; that he is addressing, you know, a female figure, it could be another male figure, it could be the male reader whom the speaker is kind of taking into confidence.

So there in Chill Out, its culture, the importance of culture through music is emphasized and here we see the professional world of registers and suitcases and so on. There is more joy, as you said, because it is, it is music and music is associated with communal feeling, people coming together, communal in that sense, the collective spirit.

And, and the private world is also acknowledged, the private world of romance, of sexuality is acknowledged and is set aside. And we also see that there is a power in the female to kind of disrupt this kind of, you know, collective processes of the community that she has some kind of agency to kind of enter into the world of text. The male speaker is allowing her to be a part of that kind of world. She is included but relegated, I think that is better than not being brought in at all. So that impression is pretty clear that we get when we read these two poems. So any other comparisons that you think you can make with 'Where would I go'?

What we can do now is I think we can read Dilip Chitre for now. We will do a quick reading of this poem and then in the next session, we will unpack it further. What do you say?

Student: Sure Ma'am.

Professor: Yeah, can you read please?

Student: Sure. 'Father Returning Home' by Dilip Chitre. "My father travels on the late evening train, standing among silent commuters in the yellow light. Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes. His shirt and pants are soggy and his black raincoat stained with mud and his back stuffed with books is falling apart. His eyes, dimmed by age, fade homeward through the humid monsoon night. Now I can see him getting off the train, like a word dropped from a long sentence. He hurries across the length of the grey platform, crosses the railway line, enters the lane. His chappals are sticky with mud, but he hurries onward. Home again, I see him drinking weak tea, eating a stale chapatti, reading a book. He goes into the toilet to contemplate Man's estrangement from a man-made world. Coming out he trembles at the sink. His cold water running over his brown hands. A few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrist. His sullen children have often refused to share jokes and secrets with him. He will now go to sleep, listening to the static on the radio, dreaming of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass.'

Professor: Okay, thank you. So this is again, a male world, but we see the intersections with the female, the domestic world as well because we have the daughter, the child. I am assuming that, you know, it is an instinctive association, that it is perhaps a female child who feels alienated from the father figure, you know, because of that cultural assumption is subconscious, isn't it? It just comes through unintended. What is interesting, you know, in terms of setting is that this is a very concrete world that we get in Dilip Chitre isn't it?

Student: Yes, yes.

Professor: It is a very concrete physical world, but whereas in 'Where would I go', we get the world in images, it is very imagistic. 'Where would I go', you know, small images here and there image of a handprint, the suitcase, an old ledge. Unconnected, you know, in some ways. But also, if you want to connect it you can, you can try and attempt that as well. But, but you can get an, a world to a pastiche of images.

But here it is a very, very, you know, a linear narrative which kind of gives you specific details about the world through which this male figure is, is traversing. So the setting is pretty strong. So when we meet again, in the next session, I think we will take the details one by one and see what

kind of meaning is added to the poem through the choice of details and think about the philosophy of the poem and perhaps connect it with the philosophy of 'Where would I go'.

And 'Where would I go' it is a kind of an existentialist idea, which is communicated by the speaker saying that there was no absence, there is no absence for this, for this male speaker, there is always presence, there is always presence. And that presence is asserted, as you pointed out, it is an assertive way of putting it. It is an assertive perspective, not the perspective of Salma. That topsy-turvy perspective, feeling alienated.

So that kind of idea is not communicated, there is no alienation there. There is there is oneness, there is oneness with the world. He is okay with the world. So he is quite comfortable. So that kind of presence, a strong presence is there in 'Where would I go', but that presence becomes complicated in Dilip Chitre's 'Father Returning Home', it is highly problematized. So we can see the fractures, we can see the crisscross of fractures in this male world of the speaker, you know, sketched by Dilip Chitre. So, thank you for your ideas for today. We will meet again and discuss further.