

The Rebirth of Past through Reminiscence in Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Roots*



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Abstract

Past never ends; it reoccurs through the influence of memory, reminiscences and life review. Literature often presents the endlessness of past through various literary devices like memoir, flashback, reminiscence, etc. There are various discussions on the importance of past. Theories of Plato, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Butler are examples for this. This paper analyses the role of the past in determining the present and future through the memories and recollections of the protagonist in the semi-autobiographical novel *Roots* (1966) written by Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, a renowned writer in Malayalam.

Keywords: Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, *Roots*, Reminiscence, Past, Life Review

Human consciousness is always influenced by past. The thoughts and actions in the present and future are the consequences of something which had happened in the past. In literature and philosophy, the role of past has been a subject of discourse since the period of Plato who had introduced the concept of 'Reminiscence'. Later eminent personalities like T.S. Eliot, Robert Butler, etc. have re-examined the philosophical and psychological dimensions of the concept of past.

T.S. Eliot in one of his poems in the *Four Quartet* says,

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time
future,
and time future contained in
time past. (p.13)

In literature, the role of past often comes through reminiscences, memoirs, life reviews and flashbacks. Past is a relevant element of all genres of literature. Wordsworth's *Lines Composed A Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798), Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1922-31), Eugene O'Neil's *Long Days Journey into Night* (1956), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Amitav Gosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988) are instances for this.

Roots is a famous novel by Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, one of the venerated icons of Malayalam literature, originally written in Malayalam in 1966 and translated into English by the veteran translator, V. Abdulla in 2002. As the novel is considered as semi-autobiographical, the life and thoughts of the protagonist Raghu, a high ranking IAS officer, much resembles that of the author. Like the author he also comes from a Tamil speaking Brahmin family settled in Kerala. The book depicts Raghu's journey to his hometown with the intention of selling his ancestral house and property to finance building a colossal mansion in Thiruvananthapuram where he works. He sets about this reluctantly, under pressure from his shrewd and domineering wife, Geetha.

The third person narrator in the novel paints the whole life of Raghu for the readers through the memories that haunt him associated with different places and peoples in his native land. This recollection of Raghu is similar to that of 'Life Review' proposed by the geriatric psychiatrist Robert Butler in 1963. It says that people who live into late life experience a natural-developmental need to review and re-examine important choices, omissions and relationships of their lives. According to him the existence of the process of Life Review is a universal developmental phenomenon. Butler says,

As the past marches in review, it is surveyed, observed, and reflected upon by the ego. Reconsiderations of previous experiences and this meaning occur, often with a concomitant revised or expanded understanding. Such reorganizations of past experience may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meanings to one's life; it may also prepare one for death, mitigating one's fears. (p. 68)

Here the protagonist has an early life review experience when he reaches his native land. There is always a longing for the past and its innocence in Raghu as the narrator describes "He had an inalienable accord with every grain of sand on that land, call it love, call it affection or

attachment. One could formulate any number of intellectual and logical reasons for selling that property. But there was something called emotion!". (p.14) A flood of memories overwhelms him when he meets his sisters and others among whom he had grown up in the village. He feels each and every nook and corner of the land has something to tell him about the past. He becomes more and more vigilant of these presences and how important these places and people to him for giving him his soul. One can clearly understand the ways in which Raghu shatters by the sites of the village. It is similar to an early life review; review of his ancestors, of his childhood, of the hardships of family and of the things which made what he is now.

There is a transformation within him when he realizes that the native village carries the souls of his grandparents and family and that is the only one thing in this whole world which will never come back if he lost it once and he could never even replace. This realization of Raghu towards the end of the work is the major reason behind not to sell his ancestral home and property. For instance, Raghu feels his whole body tingled when his brother-in-law tells him about the 'gowlipathra' coconut tree which he had planted is now yielding fruits in abundance. The narrator says "He felt that inspite of being an officer wielding authority, beneath his skin he was a villager. In the morning he would make a tour of the entire compound." (p- 54)

His boyish enthusiasm comes back when he picked out the rib from the leaf of a coconut palm and started threading it through the flowers which he picked from the ground. His emotional frailty is unveiled when he came across the stump of the mango tree which was cut down for the cremation of his father. He thinks he does not even have a picture of his father to remind him of the sacrifices the poor man had made for his sake and he realizes that he couldn't even show his children Ajayan and Suma a picture of their grandfather. Only the stamp remained as a memorial to his father. If he sells the land to Devassy, he would pull up the memorial by the roots and cast it aside. At this moment he declares that no matter whether he got five thousand rupees or five thousand pieces of gold he would not sell that property. He feels the land as not just an item of property, a home and a compound, but an entire tradition.

Raghu's decision to build the house in the village is the result of his reminiscence about his ancestors. He thinks if he builds the house in the village, his wife Geetha could breathe the air around Periyar which has an unpolluted uniqueness all of its own as compared to the polluted air around Adyar and his Ajayan and Suma would grow up as children without masks.

The abrupt ending of the novel is actually the beginning; the beginning with the rebirth of the past. He turns right at the crossroad to meet the contractor instead of turning left to Thiruvananthapuram. His realization of the sensuousness the ancestral soil writes the beginning of his new life; a new life on his roots, the roots to his Patta and Patti, his Appa, his tradition, and to his soul. Here begins the life of Raghu; the rebirth of the past.

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