

Who am I?: The Metaphors of Body and Self in Maharshi Ramana's Poetry

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(Received: 31-3-12 / Accepted: 21-4-12)

Abstract

'Who am I?' is a question we rarely ask ourselves. Man has always been aware of 'I' as the body through various manifestations in the world. At the same time it is 'I' as the Self which opens the doors to the spiritual world. Maharshi Ramana, a Seer Poet born in South India in 1879, asked the question, sought the answer and related it through metaphors in his poetry. The journey of 'I' — the body to 'I' — the Self in the form of awareness as *Brahman* brings an eternal bliss devoid of misery. The Self thus realized is eternal, formless and ever free. His spiritual journey related in his poetry through various metaphors forms the crux of his philosophy. The present paper explains metaphors for body and the Self in Maharshi's poetry. The paper discusses metaphor primarily in Indian perspective; elucidates Maharshi Ramana's idea of 'I' as body and the realized Self; and then investigates the expression of these ideas in the form of metaphors in his poetry. Maharshi successfully uses these metaphors to assert his philosophy, to affirm his doctrinal truths and to express the totality of human existence.

Keywords: Metaphor, Maharshi Ramana, metaphors of body, metaphors of self.

1. Introduction

The question and inquiry into realizing the 'Self' had begun quite early in civilization especially in India. The thinkers, philosophers and sages have suggested different ways for attainment of this realization. Each of them has explored his own path and shared his experiences with articulating attainable states of consciousness. Consequently, the recommendations of these sages, thinkers, philosophers and scholars have come to the common man either orally or in print. Underlying all the philosophical concepts, Self-enquiry has come out to be the most prominent. To attain the awareness of Self, one may follow either the *bhakti mārga* —the path of devotion or *Jñāna mārga*--the path of knowledge. This brings

eternal bliss and consciousness in one's life. M. Anantanarayana calls this realization the "destination of wisdom, bliss, awareness and light" (5). Among many seekers of such truth, Maharshi Ramana's name comes in the category of the saint-poets who were blessed with glimpses of pure Self-realization, which suffused and irradiated their whole life. His poetry is about the resplendent bliss of divine knowledge attained through self-enquiry.

Maharshi Ramana realized the *ātman* i.e. the universal Self in this mortal body at the tender age of seventeen. How and why he undertook this quest can be investigated significantly by looking at his life-history with attention to the incidents which not only changed his life forever but also had a powerful impact on the future course of the events in his life. Maharshi was born to an uncertified pleader Sundaram Ayyar and Alaggmal in Tiruchuzi about thirty miles from Madurai. His father died when he was twelve. He was brought up by his mother and uncles. Intelligent but indifferent to his studies, he did not show any inclination towards spirituality during that period. Perhaps God had predestined his life for a different course which not many people take. In 1895, he heard about Arunachala from an old couple and felt an inexplicable and indescribable ecstasy. A silent call from the mountain made it a permanent abode for him which he never left till he completed the sojourn of his earthly life. Another experience also transformed his life. While sitting on the first floor of his uncle's house in July 1896, he had a feeling of impending death despite being perfectly healthy. The feeling raised many questions with reference to the dilemma of human life. If the body was dying, what made one realize the full force of his personality? The spirit was awake in the form of 'I' within him. The realization of Self as the deathless spirit transcending the body dawned on him. David Godman describes this moment of revelation as "indivisible and universal consciousness" (1). The incidents conceptualized in the form of two main metaphors of body and Self and are delineated in his poems.

2. Understanding Metaphor

Poetry aims to communicate what is otherwise incommunicable. The poet cries the truth of man and sings the thunderous silence of God. Poetry is the wind that sings and the silence that drinks in all waves of song, life and death (Osborne 3). Poetry achieves this communicative effect of conveying more than literal meaning with the help of rhetorical devices—one among them is metaphor. One of the mysteries of human language, metaphors have been in the language since the time men first learnt to talk. They have been in the human psyche, the human mind itself. The functioning of mind is such that it talks in metaphorical language even when it is not aware. Metaphors give creativity, imagination, enrichment and the special faculty to a poet which makes poetry different from other disciplines.

2.1. Metaphor: an Indian Perspective

Metaphor is a mode of language that creates a relation between thought and words, sentences and intended utterances. Indian school of thought realized this quite early in its literary history. The roots of metaphor go to antiquity in India. Bharata in his *Nāṭyaśāstra* first talked about *alaṃkāra*-s i.e. figures of speech as poetic embellishments in chapter XVII titled "Verbal Representation and Prosody" (Rangacharya 137). Bharata recognized *rūpaka* as figure of sense which laid a foundation stone for further theoretical developments of Indian literary tradition. In the early sixth century, Bhāmaha categorized figures of speech in *śabdālaṃkāra* (a literary embellishment bearing upon sound) and *arthālaṃkāra*, (a literary embellishment bearing upon sense). *Rūpaka* belongs to the category of *arthālaṃkāra*-s which finds either complete or partial identification between *upmāna*, the thing compared and *upameya*, the thing compared to. *Rūpaka* can be *samastavastuvishya* where all the factors of *upameya* completely identify with their counterparts of *upmāna* and *ekdeśavivartī* wherein only some factors of *upameya* are identified with *upmāna* (38-39).

Daṇḍin in seventh century referring to literary and literal meaning in *Kāvyaḍarśa* accepted that a poem derived beauty from rhetorical devices. He defined *rūpaka* on the basis of

tirobhūtabhedā (difference made to disappear) where distinction between *upmāna* and *upmeya* is made to disappear purposely, erroneously or because of poetic fancy. *Rūpaka* is an *alamkāra* where similarity between two objects leads to a sense of identity (Belvalkar and Raddy 104). In the ninth century Vāmana in *Kāvyaalamakārasūtravṛtti* laying stress on *riti* defined poetry as composed of sound and sense beautified by *guna*-s and *alamkāra*-s (KASV.1.2.7). He recognized *rūpaka* as one of the thirty-three rhetorical figures. Further, Ānandvardhana, in *Dhavanyaloka* expounded *dhvani* theory which formulates another basis of metaphoric study of language.. “*Kāvyaśātmā dhvaniḥ*” (2), he says referring to suggestion as the soul of the poetry. Rājaśekhara, in the tenth century, in his significant work *Kāvyaśāstramāṃsā*, also refers to the intermingling of *rasa* (aesthetic charm), *guṇa* (quality) and *alamkāra* (rhetorical figures) for maturity of expression (Parashar 64). Mammaṭa in *Kāvyaśāstramāṃsā* also talks about *dhvani* where suggested meaning dominates the expressed (Jha 6). Thus Indian thinkers accept that there must be some relation between the primary and actual referent.

2.2. Metaphor: A Western Perspective

In the West however, Aristotle recognized metaphor as a sign of genius and its intuitive perception of similarity in dissimilars (House 121). One can find similarity in Indian and Western point of view as comparison underlies both literary traditions whether it is a partial or complete identification between *upmāna* or *upameya* drawn by Bhāmah in *Kāvyaśāstramāṃsā* or when Richards proposes two very useful terms “tenor” and “vehicle” while talking about metaphors. The tenor is the idea conveyed or illuminated by the vehicle which is the actual figurative expression. (Johnson 52).

2.3. Metaphor: A Comparison of the Indian and Western Point of View

If the Western literary world recognizes metaphor as a problem of meaning, it is the East which discusses it in detail as *lakṣanā* in case of unsuitability of context or in case of relation between primary and actual referent. Compared to the West, Indian theory of metaphor is more comprehensive because it takes care of the context in which something is spoken, the relation between primary and actual referent and the sanction of the transferred sense which popular usage gives it (Raja 232). It is a composite whole when Bhaṭṭhari talks about sentence and not the word as indivisible unit of meaning which makes sense in a given situation. Bhaṭṭhari’s idea of preferring a sentence over word as a meaning unit gave a new shape to the theory of metaphor. The extraordinary linguistic and philosophical acumen of great Indian thinkers like Bhaṭṭhari can be of valuable help to solve complicated issues in modern discussions on the subject, says Kunjunni Rana (5). This brings us closer to recent modern western theories of metaphor when Max Black talks about permeable and elastic conceptual boundaries where metaphorical thoughts and utterances sometimes embody insights expressible in no other fashion (Black 3).

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson find metaphors pervasive in our daily life (3). Andrew Ortony in *Metaphor and Thought* talks about the two approaches to metaphor viz. the constructive; and the parasitic and deviant to language. He prefers the first approach as metaphors make use of the creativity of language. He considers metaphors a part of our thought processes (2). However the Indian theories of metaphors recognized the multiple expression of language in *abhidā*, *lakṣanā* and *vyañjanā* quite early in its literary history. When *abhidā* or primary meaning is unsuitable in the given context, *lakṣanā* is resorted to. *Lakṣanā* is also important in all philosophical systems to discuss the nature of ultimate reality which is beyond expression. Metaphorical expressions help in extending the range of expression. (Raja 231-273)

2.4. Metaphor-An Overview

Thus some generalizations can be drawn about Indian theory of metaphor:

1. In Indian literary tradition, *rūpaka* is a figure of speech based on similarity.
2. Analogies in whatever form followed are an essential part of metaphor or *rūpaka*.
3. *Rūpaka* comes into use when the primary meaning does not make sense.
4. Metaphor or *rūpaka* is an embellishment bearing upon sense.
5. From being considered to a mere a figure of sense, it also takes care of context in which it is used, proximity in relation to the primary and secondary referent and the mutual expectancy on behalf of the writer and the reader.
6. *Rūpaka* is different from simile as it talks of similitude which may be either different or suppressed. However it takes care of the popular usage in which transferred sense is used.

Metaphors can explain the hidden meanings in Maharshi Ramana's poetry as it is a world beyond senses. Physical reality is describable with the help of literal language but how to explain the ideas that are beyond physical reality— is a question that has been addressed by the use of metaphor. Maharshi Ramana's metaphors for body and Self extend the literal meaning into acceptable, logical and objective communication without lapsing into vague and abstract expressions.

3. Maharshi's Philosophy of Sat, Chit and Ānanda

Betty Heimann sums up the Indian philosophy as:

the metaphor of the Spirit riding as a mere passenger in the chariot of cosmic urge...the body is vehicle, the objects are the course, the material sense- organs are the horses, while the intellect, being merely a subtler material substance, is the driver, the Spirit being only a spectator or, at any rate, no more than a master for whom all is done" (40).

She finds a radical contrast between "to be" and "to become". It is only when the 'being' 'becomes', one attains the state of *sat-chit-ānanda* and the human existence becomes an intelligent awareness. Maharshi Ramana opines that the body becomes realized Self after man traverses the stages of 'being', 'consciousness' and 'bliss'. All living beings desire to be happy and search happiness outside in the material world which offers transitory solutions. The enquiry of "who am I?" shows one the path of knowledge.

3.1. Who am I?

The question that remains to be addressed is "Who am I?" Is it the body or the Self? Maharshi answers this question in his prose work *Who am I?* The source of ideas of Maharshi can be found in the ancient scriptures of India, most of which he translated. *Bhagvad Gita*, the *Āgama-s*, *Vivekaśūdhī*, *Viśāra Maṇi Mālā*, *Ātma Sakṣātakāra* and *Devikalottara* are his translated works from which the poetry of Maharshi Ramana draws heavily upon. Maharshi's writings in prose and verse are all documents of the realization of Self as *Brahman*." Five Hymns to Arunachala", "The Essence of Instruction", "Reality in Forty Verses", "Five Verses on the Self" and many miscellaneous verses are also an expression of this realization.

Maharshi discards the idea that this body is composed of five cognitive sense organs apprehending their respective objects through sound, touch, colour, taste and odour. Man also accepts this gross body as composed of seven humors (*dhatu-s*). This is also vehemently rejected by Maharshi. The body is involved in the activities of speech, locomotion, grasping, excretion and procreation but this identity is also rejected. The five vital airs, *prāṇa* etc. also are considered as body. The mind which thinks "I am" is also not acceptable. Nescience, which is endowed by the residual impressions and has no objects and no functioning, is also

rejected. Negating all these views, Maharshi suggests that the world as it appears and seen needs to be removed.

The awareness “I am” is the realization of the self. To see the world as it is, creates an illusion, because we take it to be real. The substrate Self will not be achieved unless we stop taking this world to be real. For this the mind needs to be quiet. Maharshi says:

... ‘mind’ is a wondrous power residing in the Self. It causes all thoughts to arise...Therefore thought is the nature of mind...Just as the spider emits the thread (of the World) out of itself again and withdraws it into itself, likewise the mind projects the world out of itself and again resolves it into itself. When the mind comes out of the self, the world appears. (The Collected Works 38)

Maharshi recognizes that mind existing in dependence of something gross cannot stay alone. Mind is the subtle body. Thus, what rises as ‘I’ in this body is the mind, not the self. Of all the thoughts that arise in the body, the ‘I’ thought is the first giving rise to other thoughts. The enquiry of “Who am I?” will destroy all other thoughts. Maharshi says that the ‘I’ stands for body as long as one keeps the enquiry limited to intellect and thoughts of sense organs. As soon as one sheds ego and enters the heart, the Self thus realized is self-effulgent.

In *Who am I?*, Maharshi explains this idea with a beautiful simile: “Just as a pearl-diver ties a stone to his waist, sinks to the bottom of the sea and there takes the pearls, so each of us should be endowed with non-attachment, dive within oneself and obtain Self-Pearl.”(Collected Works 43) Other methods like breath control may control the mind from wandering into different directions for a while, but once breath resumes, the mind starts wandering because of residual impressions. Maharshi calls it as “strumpet mind” in “Five Hymns to Arunachala”. The Self after self-realization is pure silence, Godly and ever shining. Interestingly, the self starts journey in the world in gross body with ego, residual impressions and *tattva*-s. It goes on involved with the activities of world. The world is full of misery and duality. The question is whether one should consider the world real, intelligent and source of happiness or unreal and full of misery. ‘I’ travels from one end to another and finds a permanent goal of reality, intelligence and happiness. This spiritual journey from body to the realized Self finds expression in various metaphors.

4. Maharshi’s Poetry

The last section of the present study talks about metaphors Maharshi Ramana uses for ‘I’ in two manifestations. Even the small and miscellaneous poems of Maharshi, selected for the present study, begin with the commonly accepted view that we are bodies in flesh and blood. Screwed to the idea, we hardly seem to know the self-effulgence within ourselves. ‘I am’ is not the body; it is God, Self or divinity within us. Maharshi makes use of metaphors for body and Self beautifully in a small poem named “Dīpavali?”. *Dīpavali* is celebrated among Hindus as a festival of lights. Symbolically it celebrates the victory of good over evil as God Rama killed demon Ravana and returned to his kingdom. The people celebrated and lighted their houses. Light is symbolic of knowledge just as darkness for ignorance. This small poem talks about ‘I’ which is metaphorically called “the Naraka” or ego. The same ‘I’ shines as the Self in glory after killing Naraka. The awareness in heart is *Dīpavali* —the festival of lights. Quoting lines would suffice to give an idea.

The demon Naraka (ego) who rules the hell, (has)
The notion ‘I am this body’ ...
With the discus of *jnana*, Narayana
Destroys the demon...
Shining as the Self in glory...
This is festival of light, Dipavali (The Collected Works 147)

The idea that rules all of us is that we are all bodies dominated by Ego. Metaphorically speaking, ego is the demon Naraka, the *jñāna* or knowledge is the discus thrown by

Narayana, the God to kill demon of ego. The Self shines as 'I' in the form of eternal light. Ego, *jñāna*, Self are all *upmāna*-s and *Naraka*, discus and hell are all *upmeya*-s. The *upmāna*-s compared with *upmeya*-s are *samastvishrupaka* as defined by Bhāmaha in *Kāvyaśloka* as there is complete identification of *upmāna*-s : ego, *jñāna* and Self with *upmeya*-s: *Naraka*, discus and *Dīpavālī*. If ego is killed by man, the Self shines with all its glory like *Dīpavālī*.—the festival of lights.

Another small poem “Liberation” uses metaphors of “dove”, “hunter” and “forest”.

The dove escaping from the hunter's hand
escapes too from the forest, it is said. When
the hunter hunting for 'I' gains freedom,
the forest shrinks into a home (148).

Dove as a metaphor stands for body as well as mind. When the dove tries to escape from hunter's hand, it escapes from forest also. Similarly 'I' as body also hunts for 'I' the Self and once realized, it escapes bondage from ego, sense impressions and residual impressions of mind. Maharshi gives a beautiful example of wind which at once gathers the clouds and disperses them (230). It is the 'I' which is lost in the distractions of the world and again it is the 'I' which searches for self that escapes from bondage. The two states of 'I' appear contrary but are complementary. When the self is realized, even the bondage of the world does not mean anything. In fact, it is not bondage at all. Self-realization takes one away from bondage. The *upmeya* here is dove. 'I' is *upamāna* It is carrying the idea of bondage as well as freedom. The only difference to be brought is Knowledge. To quote a few lines from *Vivekacūdamani* would make the metaphor more explicit, “Knowledge of a mirage keeps one away from it, and ignorance that it is a mirage leads one to seek it. Similarly, knowledge leads to path of release and ignorance leads to worldly pursuits” (255). Forest is again a metaphor for worldly pursuits which trap a man. What strikes a reader particularly in this small poem is the complex philosophy delineated in such simple metaphorical expressions.

Another small poem titled *Silence* uses a metaphor in close proximity as its predicate.

Silence, the unique language, ever surging in the
Heart, is the state of grace. (149)

Surging is a transitive verb which has several meanings: to rise and fall actively, to toss particularly a ship surging in heavy seas, to rise and move in waves or billows, to swell in the sea. The verb, as can be seen, is generally used for a movement in a sea. Here what surges is not the ship but the silence which brings bliss and grace to the heart. 'Silence' is a partial metaphor which expresses meaning directly as well as implicitly. Silence is an implied metaphor of ship which swells or rolls over the heart like a sea. It is the word 'Surging' which is contiguous and in proximity to 'Silence' which gives it a metaphorical meaning. Thus context in which metaphor is used and the proximity of metaphor to subject are the two important factors for the transference of meaning. Primary meaning here is retained in the 'surging in the heart', but silence gets a metaphorical meaning by its proximity to the word 'surging'.

In “A Jnani and His Body” the transfer of meaning is indicated directly through simile.

Just as one lets go of the leaf after eating the food, the seer lets go his body (Collected Works 149).

The comparison is clear. People in South India use banana leaves to have their food. The leaf here is body which caters to the need of eating food of Self. Body has sense organs and ego. It is unreal, subject to change from moment to moment. Once a seer realizes this Self, the body is of no need, Maharshi's whole philosophy is expressed very concisely in these two lines. 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*)” (Mahadevan 124). The seer is not attached to his body; it

serves a purpose of mere self-realization. The body like a banana leaf is required to hold food of Self, and is indispensable as long as food is served. Maharshi explains it with another simile, “Just as the axe and other tools of the carpenter are the only means for his activities, so this subtle body is only the means for the activities of the Self which is ever aware” (233). There is no ellipsis in the poem as can be seen from the use of “just as”.

Ocean is a recurring metaphor used both for body and Self in Maharshi’s poetry. It has different meanings according to the context in which it is used. In “The Necklet of Nine Gems”, it is used for *Samsara* where one finds transient pleasures “drowning in the sea of universal illusion” (97). The body sometimes sinks and at other times rises in the sense enjoyments in the world. The man finds no way of escape. “The Self in the Heart” is a verse from the eighth stanza of “Reality in Forty Verses: Supplement” which metaphorically talks about ‘heart’ as an ocean in which one dives deep to abide in *ātman* forever. Thus ocean is a metaphor which does not have one constant meaning in Maharshi’s poetry. As has been earlier said in this paper, that metaphors are complex phenomena which involve capability on the part of the writer and the reader. Beyond the literal meaning, they construct a world of their own- a world shared by everyone who participates in it. Thus it is the mutual expectancy between the writer and reader which creates new meanings. In the following verse, the ocean is represented as a treasure-house of untold bliss.

Enter deep into the Heart
By search for Self, or diving deep,
With breath under check.
Thus abide ever in *Atman* (143).

It is only when man dives deep in the ocean of heart that he realizes this Self-eternal and pure bliss. Ocean here stands for the heart full of grace. To quote lines from “Five Hymns to Arunachala” brings out the radical contrast in the meaning of the metaphor:

I fell into the deep sea called jaganmaya and was drowned.
Thou didst draw me to thee, Arunachala, consciousness itself (97).

The words in both the extracts make the difference clear. The second extract refers to metaphor of body where ‘I’ falls into worldly pursuits, whereas the first extract refers to ocean as heart where the Self is realized. Ocean has also been used as an epithet where Maharshi addresses Arunachala the God as “boundless ocean of Grace’ (103) It is in “Self-Knowledge” (*Ātam-Vidyā*) that Maharshi beautifully sums up the whole philosophy of body and Self:

The thought ‘I am the body’ is the thread
On which are strung together various thoughts.
Questing within, enquiring ‘Who am I?
And whence this thought?’ all other thoughts
Vanish. And as ‘I’, ‘I’ within the Heart-cave
The Self shines of its own accord (134).

Mammaṭa defines partial metaphor as *ekdeśavivartī* “where some of the imposed factors are directly expressed by words, while others are cognized only through the force of the meanings of the words (Jha 375)”. ‘I’ thinks it to be a body and is a thread “on which are strung together various thoughts”. The reference is made to a necklace or a garland. The expression undergoes a complete change when ‘I’ shines in the Heart-cave’ after self-inquiry. Here two metaphorical concepts are discovered. ‘I’ stands for body holding various other thoughts like a thread. One enters the cave of the heart and finds self-effulgence. The extract begins with ‘I’ as an oft-accepted idea that one is body with many thoughts of worldly pursuits going on. The quest for ‘I’ the self starts within himself. Once realized, it starts shining within the cave of the heart where the darkness prevailed earlier.

5. Conclusion

Going through Maharshi Ramana's poetry, one comes to the conclusion that journey of 'I' starts with the body which is overpowered by mental states and is therefore a cause of misery. It submerges one in the sense enjoyments leading to bondage by ego. Self is not body consciousness. It is *Brahman* infinite. When asked to explain, Maharshi said that awareness of self is already there in man, the only need is to shed ego and the concept of 'I am body'. Man needs to shed his self-limiting tendencies of mind and ego. The ability to do so is always present in man, only his ignorance prevents it. Once aware, it is being- consciousness-bliss. Contrary to perceptible experience of individuality, it is a non-personal, all-inclusive awareness. (Be As You Are 9). Maharshi uses different terms for this awareness- Self, God and heart. All terms however indicate towards the same reality. The essence of Maharshi's poetry in the form of metaphors for body and Self can be condensed thus. 'I' is not body consciousness made up of seven humours or five cognitive sense organs. Self or 'I' is *Brahman* infinite and the core of being. 'I' the Body is touched by hunger, thirst, sorrow, delusion, old age and death whereas 'I' the Self is untouched by the same. 'I' the Self is self-effulgent. Its very nature is happiness. The mind experiences happiness when there is no thought. To resolve the mind in the Self, one has to remain quiet and dive within heart. The journey of 'I' starts with body and ends with realization of Self as *Brahman*- infinite, eternal, liberated and blissful. Getting rid of body is really not liberation; it really means to loose the knot of ignorance in the heart. Body and sense organs need to be burnt in the fire of knowledge and are absorbed in the *Brahman*. One needs to know this eternal truth in the journey of life. Maharshi has captured the totality of human existence from one end to the other in the metaphors of body and Self.

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