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Alienation and Aging in Urban India: A Multi-Dimensional Study of Dilip Chitre's *Father Returning Home*

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Abstract

This paper explores Dilip Chitre's "*Father Returning Home*" as a modern Indian poetic masterpiece that subtly weaves themes of alienation, aging, and spiritual estrangement within the urban landscape. Through close textual analysis, the study identifies the poem's use of literary devices—such as imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and enjambment—and interprets how these elements contribute to its emotional depth and philosophical undercurrents. The structure and tone of the poem mirror the father's inner journey, marked by solitude, resignation, and reflection.

Beyond its literary richness, the paper contextualizes the poem within the framework of Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom, drawing parallels with key ideas from the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Shrimad Bhagavat Mahapurana. The father, as portrayed in the poem, becomes emblematic of the modern-day *jiva*—caught between mechanical routines and forgotten spiritual longings. His quiet introspection is aligned with *atma-vichara* (self-inquiry), *vairagya* (dispassion), and the Upanishadic call to look beyond the ephemeral world.

Through this multidisciplinary approach—combining literary analysis, philosophical interpretation, and cultural contextualization—the paper reveals "*Father Returning Home*" not just as a social commentary but as a deeply meditative work, echoing timeless Indian spiritual truths in a contemporary idiom.

Preface

"*Father Returning Home*" by Dilip Chitre is a profound modern Indian poem that quietly captures the emotional landscape of aging, alienation, and existential introspection. Set against the backdrop of a dreary monsoon evening and the grey urbanity of Indian city life, the poem does not merely portray a tired old man returning home from work—it documents the spiritual and emotional void that defines modern existence. Through precise imagery, subdued metaphors, and a tone of quiet resignation, Chitre invites the reader to witness not only the father's physical journey through rain-slicked platforms and sticky chappals but also his deeper psychological and philosophical journey into the heart of human loneliness.

What makes this poem uniquely resonant is its ability to echo ancient philosophical themes from Indian scriptures—the estrangement of the self from the world (as described in the Upanishads), the ideal of dispassion from the Bhagavad Gita, and the inner renunciation celebrated in the Vachanamrut. It places the mundane and the metaphysical side by side, revealing that even in an ordinary train ride home, one might trace the contours of an unspoken inner quest.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Dilip Chitre's poem is laden with powerful **imagery**, **metaphors**, and **symbolism** that express themes of alienation, aging, and modern disconnection.

- **Imagery** is central: the poem opens with "yellow light," "soggy shirt," "mud-stained coat," and "sticky chappals," vividly evoking the father's worn-out physical and psychological state. These concrete visuals symbolize the dreariness of routine and the toll of urban life.

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- **Metaphor:** “Like a word dropped from a long sentence” compares the father’s descent from the train to a forgotten or misplaced word—underscoring invisibility and insignificance in society and family.
- **Personification:** “Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes” gives motion and life to the suburbs, contrasting with the lifeless stare of the father—suggesting disconnection from surroundings.
- **Alliteration and Assonance:** Phrases like “sullen children” and “static on the radio” subtly enhance the rhythm and mood without drawing overt attention.
- **Symbolism:**
 - The **train** is symbolic of life’s journey.
 - **Radio static** stands for disconnection and emotional noise.
 - The **toilet** becomes a rare space for inner reflection, a metaphor for existential detachment.
- **Irony:** Though surrounded by family and living in a bustling world, the father is spiritually alone, suggesting the irony of modern connectedness.

2. Structure and Form

- The poem is written in **free verse**, without a fixed rhyme scheme or metrical pattern, reflecting the unpredictable, fragmented emotional landscape of the father’s life.
- It consists of **two stanzas**: the first deals with the external journey (train and platform), and the second shifts inward (domestic life and mental state), mirroring the father’s transition from public to private space.
- Use of **enjambment** (e.g., “His shirt and pants are soggy/ and his black raincoat”) creates a flowing, uninterrupted rhythm that mirrors the monotony of daily routine.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Alienation and loneliness** in modern urban settings.
- **Aging and invisibility** of elders in a fast-paced world.
- **Disconnection** within the family structure.
- The poem subtly critiques **mechanical modern life** and the loss of emotional intimacy.

A deeper message concerns **the spiritual impoverishment** of modern life and the need to recognize the inner lives of those we often overlook.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Subtly melancholic, empathetic, introspective.
- **Mood:** The poem evokes feelings of sorrow, reflection, guilt, and compassion. The reader feels the father's invisibility and pain through the monotony and silence that surrounds him.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

The poem reflects **existentialist** concerns—man’s **estrangement from a man-made world** echoes themes in **Jean-Paul Sartre** and **Albert Camus** about isolation and absurdity.

From a **Vedantic** lens:

- The father's dispassionate detachment from his surroundings resembles the **Gita’s** teaching of *Nishkama Karma* (selfless action).

- His contemplation in the toilet is like a **hermitic withdrawal**, invoking the Upanishadic idea of **inner inquiry (Atma-vichara)** amid worldly chaos.
- His dreams of ancestors and descendants echo the **Bhagavad Gita 2.13ⁱ**, which discusses the cycle of aging and rebirth (*dehino'smin yathā dehe kaumāram...*). From the **Vachanamrut** or Bhakti traditions, the theme of *virakti* (dispassion) resonates—though not explicitly spiritual, the father's detachment could be interpreted as a *grhastha* (householder) experiencing the futility of mundane existence.

Certainly. Let’s explore how Dilip Chitre’s poem “**Father Returning Home**” aligns with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, with specific references from the **Vedas, Upanishads, Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Shrimad Bhagavat Mahapurān**, among others.

Vedantic and Upanishadic Interpretation of “Father Returning Home”

Dilip Chitre’s “*Father Returning Home*” presents a poignant image of a modern man estranged from both society and self, resonating deeply with the **Upanishadic and Vedantic** vision of the human predicament and spiritual journey. While the poem is secular and modernist in tone, it unwittingly reflects eternal truths found in **Sanātana Dharma**: alienation from the world, the futility of sensory life, and the quiet search for inner realization.

1. The Estranged Self: Avidya and Samsara

“His eyes dimmed by age fade homeward through the humid monsoon night.”

This fading and alienation reflect the **Upanishadic idea of Avidya (ignorance)**—where the individual soul (*jiva*) becomes trapped in the external world of change, desire, and suffering.

Katha Upanishad 1.2.6–7:ⁱⁱ

“Perishing are those worlds that are gained by actions. The ignorant dwell in darkness, but greater darkness is the deluded who live in the pursuit of knowledge alone.”

Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.10:ⁱⁱⁱ

“He who thinks himself wise, but does not know the Self, wanders around like the blind led by the blind.”

The father, going through mechanical motions, is **symbolic of the jiva trapped in Samsara**, the cycle of birth, death, and habitual suffering.

2. Withdrawal and Inner Contemplation: The Path of Jnana

“He goes into the toilet to contemplate / Man’s estrangement from a man-made world.”

This moment of solitude, however mundane the setting, reflects a kind of **Vedantic withdrawal (nivṛtti)**—a detachment from the outer world and a subtle turning inward.

Bhagavad Gita 6.10:^{iv}

“A yogi should constantly engage the mind in meditation, remaining in a secluded place, alone, with the mind and body controlled, free from desires and possessions.”

Though not a formal yogi, the father embodies this principle in a poetic, existential way: he retreats inward in his only available space, not a hermitage, but a toilet—a **modern tapasya** of sorts.

Vachanamrut Gadhada II-62 (Swaminarayan):

“Even while remaining in the household, one should mentally renounce it and constantly contemplate on the nature of the self.”

The father's mental act of contemplation aligns with the **ideal of the inward renunciate** (*antar-vairagi*), even if he's not outwardly renounced.

3. Dispassion (Vairagya) and Emotional Detachment

“He drinks weak tea, eats a stale chapati... listens to the static on the radio.”

These simple, flavorless details symbolize **Vairagya** (dispassion) — a detachment from worldly pleasure, which is central to Vedanta and Bhakti.

Bhagavad Gita 2.71:^v

“That person attains peace who, abandoning all desires, moves about without longing, devoid of 'I' and 'mine'.”

Shrimad Bhagavatam 1.2.6:^{vi}

“The supreme occupation (dharma) for all humanity is that by which man can attain loving devotional service to the Lord... without cause or selfish motivation.”

Though the poem does not show Bhakti explicitly, the father's **non-demanding nature** and **renunciation of expectation** illustrate this **ideal of selfless acceptance**—which is foundational to Bhakti and Vedanta.

4. Transgenerational Reflection: The Cycle of Karma

“Dreaming of his ancestors and grandchildren... nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass.”

This dream signifies **Samsara and Karma** — the interconnectedness of generations, the flow of time, and **the illusion of permanence**.

Isha Upanishad 1:^{vii}

“All this—whatever exists in this changing universe—should be covered by the Lord. Protect the Self by renunciation. Lust not after any man's wealth.”

Bhagavad Gita 4.13:^{viii}

“The fourfold division of human society was created by Me according to the distribution of qualities and activities.”

This reflection of ancestry and posterity also aligns with **Shrimad Bhagavatam's** vision of **time as cyclical**, where all roles—father, child, nomad, citizen—are but temporary forms (*nama-rupa*), to be transcended in the pursuit of the **Eternal Self** (*Atman*).

5. The Final State: A Quiet Resignation or a Step Toward Moksha?

“He will now go to sleep / Listening to the static on the radio...”

Sleep is both literal and metaphorical—it suggests **tamas** (inertia), **ignorance**, but also a possible transition, a liminal state between bondage and awakening.

Mandukya Upanishad (Verse 6)^{ix} :

“The state of deep sleep is when the sleeper desires nothing nor beholds any dream. That is the Self. That is to be known.”

The **radio static** is symbolic of the noise of samsara—meaningless, repetitive, but capable of being turned off when true knowledge (*Jnana*) arises.

Conclusion: The Father as a Modern Sage in Disguise

Though Dilip Chitre's father is not overtly religious, he embodies the **silent wisdom of Vedanta**: enduring without attachment, reflecting without preaching, aging with quiet renunciation. His life is a **parable of samsara**, and his moments of solitude are hints of **Sannyasa** amidst samsaric noise.

Key Takeaways:

- The poem captures the **Vedantic dilemma of disconnection** and the **Upanishadic call to introspection**.
- The father is a **householder-sage**, unseen by others, yet walking the inner path of realization.
- He teaches the reader, like a rishi in disguise, to look beyond appearances and rediscover **Atma, Dharma, and Moksha** in daily life.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

Written during the **late 20th century**, in post-independence urban India, the poem reflects the **fragmentation of traditional Indian families** and the alienation brought on by **urban migration, westernized education, and capitalist routines**.

Chitre, a bilingual poet from Maharashtra, was deeply influenced by the **Modernist movement**, and his poetry critiques **consumerism, industrial alienation, and the erosion of familial intimacy**.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

Chitre likely draws from **personal memory or observation**, and possibly projects **his own fears** of aging or a parent's invisibility in an indifferent society.

There's a strong sense of **nostalgia, melancholy, and resigned compassion**. The choice of weak tea and stale food may reflect emotional and material neglect—possibly inspired by the poet's reflections on his own father or father-figures in urban India.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• **Audience:** Urban Indian youth, middle-class families, and reflective readers.

• **Purpose:**

○ To evoke empathy for elderly parents.

○ To criticize emotional alienation in modern family life.

o To document the silent suffering of countless fathers in Indian cities.

It's both a **social critique** and a **quiet plea** to reconnect with the roots of familial and emotional responsibility.

9. Personal Interpretation

Father Returning Home is more than a portrait of a tired old man—it is a **mirror held to a society** that neglects its elders and glorifies speed over stillness. It leaves an **open-ended** question: Are we seeing our parents and elders, or are they merely **“words dropped from a long sentence”**?

On a personal note, the poem forces the reader to introspect—when was the last time we noticed our parents' eyes, their routine, or the loneliness beneath their silence? It compels us to **reconsider our roles as children, as citizens, and as inheritors of a culture once built on respect and care for the aging.**

Conclusion

Dilip Chitre's *“Father Returning Home”* is a quietly powerful reflection on the silent suffering of the elderly, the emotional fragmentation of urban families, and the deeper spiritual desolation of modernity. With poetic restraint and philosophical depth, Chitre constructs a figure who is both invisible to his world and deeply aware of its estrangement—a father, a commuter, a seeker. In its portrayal of routine, the poem reveals rupture; in its sparse details, it unveils timeless truths.

Read through the lens of Vedantic and Upanishadic wisdom, the poem becomes a modern meditation on *vairagya* (dispassion), *atma-vichara* (self-inquiry), and the spiritual loneliness of the householder-sage. The father's return is not only a homecoming through streets and railway lines but a symbolic retreat into the self, where the noise of the world fades into static, and memory stretches across generations. The poem, therefore, does not simply narrate a man's day—it resonates as a modern scripture in miniature, reminding us of the quiet dignity of those who live unseen, and the eternal truths that shimmer beneath the surface of the everyday.

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तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ १३ ॥
- II. न सांपरायः प्रतिभाति बालम् प्रमाद्यन्तं वित्तमोहेन मूढम् ।
अयं लोको नास्ति पर इति मानी पुनः पुनर्वशमापद्यते मे ॥ ६ ॥
- III. इष्टापूर्तं मन्यमाना वरिष्ठं नान्यच्छ्रेयो वेदयन्ते प्रमूढाः ।
नाकस्य पृष्ठे ते सुकृतेऽनुभूत्वेमं लोकं हीनतरं वा विशन्ति ॥ १० ॥
- IV. योगी युञ्जीत सततमात्मानं रहसि स्थितः ।
एकाकी यतचित्तात्मा निराशीरपरिग्रहः ॥ 10 ॥

- V. विहाय कामान्यः सर्वान्पुमांश्चरति निःस्पृहः ।
निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः स शान्तिमधिगच्छति ॥ 71 ॥
- VI. स वै पुंसां परो धर्मो यतो भक्तिरधोक्षजे ।
अहैतुक्यप्रतिहता ययात्मा सुप्रसीदति ॥ ६ ॥
- VII. ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १ ॥
- VIII. चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः ।
तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम् ॥ 13 ॥
- IX. एष सर्वेश्वरः एष सर्वज्ञ एषोऽन्तर्याम्येष योनिः सर्वस्य प्रभवाप्ययौ हि
भूतानाम् ॥ ६ ॥