

Withdrawal and Engagement: A Study of Arundhati Subramaniam's *When God is a Traveller*

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1.1 Abstract

Arundhati Subramaniam is a Sahitya Akademi awardee for literature in the year 2020. Subramaniam's poems articulate the paradoxical interplay between the desire for solitude and the inevitability of human connections, capturing the tension between spiritual detachment and worldly engagement. Her poetic voice, marked by introspection and humour, bridges metaphysical musings and earthly concerns. The study will analyse how mythological motifs, urban landscapes, and intimate reflections converge in her poetry to underscore the oscillation between withdrawal and engagement in the context of the book *When God is a Traveller*. Through close textual analysis, this research explores Subramaniam's use of imagery, tone, and symbolism to convey the interplay of solitude and connection. It also considers how her poetic language mirrors the broader human experience of grappling with dualities—stillness and movement, silence and articulation, the spiritual and the mundane. Ultimately, this paper examines that *When God is a Traveller* is a compelling meditation on the necessity of both withdrawal and engagement in the journey of self-discovery, affirming that the path to spiritual fulfilment lies in embracing the paradoxes of existence. The book seems to be a culmination of spiritual exploration and modern existence, which delves into the human yearning for meaning and connection. This study employs a qualitative methodology, grounded in textual analysis and interpretative approaches, to examine the thematic interplay of withdrawal and engagement in Arundhati Subramaniam's *When God is a Traveller*. It addresses a research gap regarding the nuanced interplay of withdrawal and engagement in her work, a recurring yet underexplored theme in critical discussions.

Keywords: *Arundhati Subramaniam, spiritual poetry, withdrawal and engagement, When God is a Traveller, myth and modernity, retreat and immersion in life*

1.2 Introduction to the poet:

Arundhati Subramaniam is a prominent voice in contemporary Indian English poetry, celebrated for her lyrical depth and philosophical introspection. Born in Mumbai in 1967, she grew up amidst a rich cultural milieu that shaped her literary sensibilities. Subramaniam's poetry reflects a unique confluence of tradition and modernity, offering a contemplative lens on themes such as spirituality, identity, love, and alienation. Her literary journey began with the publication of *On Cleaning Bookshelves* (2001), a collection that immediately marked her as a poet of remarkable talent. Subsequent works, such as *Where I Live: New & Selected Poems* (2009) and *When God is a Traveller* (2014), solidified her reputation as a poet capable of exploring profound themes with nuanced simplicity. She has also edited and curated anthologies like *Confronting Love* (2005), which further underline her commitment to the craft of poetry.

Subramaniam's poetry is often described as deeply rooted in Indian spiritual traditions while resonating with universal themes. Her engagement with Bhakti poetry, particularly through her essays and translations, reveals her fascination with devotional literature as a means of articulating existential dilemmas. This spiritual undercurrent finds vivid expression in her most celebrated work, *When God is a Traveller*. Published in 2014, *When God is a Traveller* is a critically acclaimed collection that won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2020. The book was shortlisted for T S Eliot Prize in 2015. The book is a meditation on themes of journeying—both physical and spiritual—and the quest for self-discovery. Through an evocative blend of mythical allusions, personal reflections, and contemporary concerns, Subramaniam creates a poetic tapestry that speaks to the human condition.

Subramaniam's work holds a significant place in Indian English poetry, not only for its aesthetic richness but also for its philosophical depth. Her ability to intertwine the sacred with the secular, the mythical with the mundane, has garnered widespread acclaim. In *When God is a Traveller*, she achieves a delicate balance between withdrawal—a retreat into introspection and spirituality—and engagement—a confrontation with the chaos and vitality of everyday life. The critical acclaim for the collection has been overwhelming, with reviewers praising Subramaniam's lyrical mastery and her ability to navigate complex themes with clarity and grace. While many studies have examined the spiritual dimensions of her poetry, the specific dynamic of withdrawal and engagement in *When God is a Traveller* remains relatively

underexplored. This paper seeks to fill that gap, offering a comprehensive analysis of how these themes shape the poet's vision and voice.

1.3 Literature Review:

When God is a Traveller has been lauded by critics for its profound exploration of spirituality, mythology, and human emotions. Writing for *The Hindu*, Arundhati Venkatesh notes, "*Subramaniam's poetry achieves the impossible—bringing alive ancient myths while embedding them firmly in today's world.*" Similarly, Jeet Thayil, in a review for *Scroll*, describes the collection as "*a map of the soul's restless odyssey, rendered in language that shimmers with clarity.*" Other critics have highlighted the poet's ability to evoke universal truths through intensely personal experiences.

Existing scholarly works on Subramaniam often focus on her engagement with Bhakti traditions, her feminist undertones, and her use of mythology. For instance, in *The Sacred and the Secular in Arundhati Subramaniam's Poetry* (2020), Anita Sharma explores how the poet negotiates spiritual longing and worldly entanglements. Existing studies have largely analysed her poetry through feminist, spiritual, or cultural lenses, but few delve into this thematic duality, particularly in the context of its philosophical and existential implications. There is a need to investigate how Subramaniam's poetry negotiates withdrawal and engagement not as oppositional forces but as complementary modes of being. This research aims to bridge this gap by examining how these themes unfold in her work, particularly in the context of contemporary Indian society and its grappling with tradition and modernity. Such an exploration can offer deeper insights into her poetic philosophy and its relevance to broader human experiences.

1.4 Research Gap:

While considerable research has been conducted on Arundhati Subramaniam's poetic oeuvre, much of the scholarly attention focuses on her themes of spirituality, identity, and the urban experience. However, there remains a gap in exploring the nuanced dynamics of withdrawal and engagement as central to her poetry. In *When God is a Traveller*, Subramaniam navigates a delicate interplay between retreating from the external world and participating meaningfully in it. The collection often juxtaposes moments of introspection and detachment with those of connection and action, suggesting a duality that mirrors both personal and universal struggles.

1.5 Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on textual analysis of selected poems from *When God is a Traveller*. The methodology involves close reading to uncover recurring themes and motifs of withdrawal and engagement, alongside a comparative analysis of the poet's integration of mythical and contemporary elements to express these ideas. The findings are contextualized within existing critical frameworks on Subramaniam's work, supplemented by secondary sources such as book reviews, interviews, and scholarly articles, to provide a holistic understanding of the poet's artistic and philosophical concerns.

1.6 Findings and Analysis

Arundhati Subramaniam's poetry in *When God is a Traveller* explores the intricate dance between withdrawal and engagement—two forces that define human existence. Through her lyrical mastery, Subramaniam weaves themes of introspection, relationships, spirituality, and urban modernity, offering profound insights into the human condition. This discussion examines the various dimensions of withdrawal and engagement in her work, focusing on the interplay of solitude and connectedness, myth and modernity, and the role of the poetic voice in mediating these dualities.

1.6.1 Concept of withdrawal

The concept of withdrawal in Arundhati Subramaniam's *When God is a Traveller* emerges as an evocative theme interwoven through the poet's exploration of myth, personal identity, and the human experience. Subramaniam's poetic landscape often oscillates between the external world and an inward retreat, embodying the paradoxical nature of withdrawal: as both an act of self-preservation and a step toward deeper engagement. Withdrawal, in Subramaniam's poetic ethos, is not a renunciation of the world but a deliberate turning inward to rediscover the self and its connections with the larger cosmos. She writes, "*I've sought refuge in other people's silences, / fled to their shadows*" (*When God is a Traveller* 11), illustrating the duality of escape and intimacy. This line encapsulates how withdrawal can be both an evasion of external chaos and a quest for solace in shared humanity.

One of the central motifs in the collection is the figure of the god Muruga, representing the eternal traveller who oscillates between withdrawal and return. In the titular poem, Subramaniam reflects on the mythic wanderer, noting, "*You are the god of the cusp, / the interloper who straddles / the threshold of here and there*" (22). The cusp becomes a metaphor

for withdrawal—a space that is neither entirely detached from nor fully immersed in the world, allowing for reflection and renewal. Moreover, Subramaniam’s poetry often portrays withdrawal as a confrontation with the self’s vulnerabilities and truths. In “The Abandoned Village,” she describes the visceral stillness of a place deserted by its inhabitants: “*The cobwebbed silence, / the crumbling walls, / are nothing but the skin / of another kind of vitality*” (44). The imagery of decay suggests that withdrawal is not an end but a transformation—a retreat that nurtures unseen life and possibilities.

This theme also resonates with the poet’s meditations on relationships and the spaces they inhabit. In “Prayer,” she writes, “*Let me not say I loved him / when all I did was / hunger for the safety of his shadow*” (31). Here, withdrawal becomes an acknowledgment of emotional dependency, a moment of clarity that lays bare the inadequacies of superficial engagement. Subramaniam’s work redefines withdrawal as an act of courage and introspection, countering the perception of it as mere escapism. It becomes a necessary interval in life’s rhythm—a pause that allows for rediscovery and renewal. As she eloquently observes in “Confession”: “*This is how I know I am alive— / when withdrawal feels like / the pulse beneath the static*” (57).

The poet’s nuanced depiction of withdrawal as a transformative experience invites readers to reflect on their own moments of solitude and introspection. Subramaniam’s ability to weave mythological, personal, and philosophical strands into this theme positions her work as a compelling commentary on the human condition, offering solace and insight to those navigating the complexities of modern existence. This theme of withdrawal extends beyond mythology into poems that dwell on solitude. For instance, her explorations of silence and inner emptiness underscore a desire for spiritual clarity. Through sparse yet evocative language, Subramaniam crafts an intimate atmosphere where the reader is invited to retreat alongside the poetic voice. The act of withdrawal is presented not as an act of loneliness but as a necessary step toward self-renewal and enlightenment.

1.6.2 Concept of Engagement:

When God is a Traveller presents engagement as a dynamic interplay between self, others, and the world. Rooted in mythological and contemporary contexts, the poet’s exploration of engagement goes beyond superficial involvement to encompass profound connections, introspection, and active participation in life’s complexities. Engagement, in Subramaniam’s poetry, often manifests as a dialogue with the divine, the self, and the external world. In “*To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn’t Find Me Identifiably Indian,*” she reflects on her identity,

proclaiming, "I'm the mongrel you thought you'd turned away / in your tourist town" (When God is a Traveller 17). Here, engagement takes the form of resistance and assertion, a refusal to be boxed into monolithic cultural categories. By confronting stereotypes, the poet engages with her multifaceted identity, embodying a cosmopolitan sensibility.

The titular poem, *When God is a Traveller* uses the myth of Muruga to explore engagement as both a journey and a commitment. Subramaniam writes, "*To the god of eternal youth, / who picks the lock of every door*" (22), portraying the deity as a symbol of curiosity and boundless connection. Engagement here is an act of unlocking—seeking, exploring, and experiencing life beyond boundaries. The journey becomes an emblem of perpetual interaction with the unknown. Subramaniam's engagement with relationships is equally nuanced. In "Prayer," she navigates the tension between longing and genuine connection, admitting, "*Let me not say I loved him / when all I did was / hunger for the safety of his shadow*" (31). The poem interrogates the nature of human bonds, revealing how true engagement requires vulnerability and authenticity rather than mere dependence.

The poet's work also highlights engagement with silence and stillness, suggesting that connection is not always outward but can be deeply introspective. In "Leapfrog," she observes, "*It takes a while / to know that the quiet isn't emptiness, / but the fullness of waiting*" (54). Here, engagement involves attunement to the subtleties of existence, where moments of pause are imbued with meaning and potential. Moreover, Subramaniam often bridges the mythical and the contemporary to articulate her vision of engagement. In "The Word," she writes, "*The syllable trembles, / then leaps like a spark*" (40), portraying language as an active, living force that connects the speaker with the listener and the material with the spiritual. This dynamic relationship underscores how engagement involves constant movement and transformation.

In Subramaniam's poetic universe, engagement is not limited to human relationships but extends to the cosmic and existential. Her poems invite readers to participate in the dance of life—embracing its uncertainties, forging connections, and seeking meaning. As she observes in *On Cleaning Bookshelves*, "*Sometimes, the books we stumble upon / are the ones we need to meet again*" (68). Engagement, then, is a serendipitous rediscovery, a commitment to revisiting and reevaluating what we encounter. Subramaniam's exploration of engagement in *When God is a Traveller* redefines it as a fluid, multi-layered process that integrates the personal, social, and universal. By weaving themes of connection, introspection, and

interaction, her poetry resonates with the complexities of modern life, urging readers to embrace engagement as a transformative act.

While Subramaniam's poetry celebrates withdrawal, it equally values engagement. Many of her poems embrace the chaos and beauty of the everyday world, highlighting the interconnectedness of mundane existence and spiritual experience. The poet frequently juxtaposes urban settings with spiritual undertones, demonstrating that the divine is not separate from daily life but embedded within it. For example, her poem "Prayer" blends humour and irony as she navigates the trivialities of modern life while seeking divine guidance. This poem and others like it explore relationships, urban discontent, and the paradoxes of contemporary living, showcasing Subramaniam's ability to engage with modernity without losing sight of the spiritual.

The poet's use of humour is particularly striking. In poems like *To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find Me Identifiably Indian*, she uses wit to critique cultural stereotypes, engaging with societal concerns in a way that is both sharp and playful. Engagement, in this sense, becomes an act of asserting one's identity and addressing external realities with a grounded yet lyrical approach.

The themes of withdrawal and engagement in Subramaniam's poetry hold broader philosophical implications for the human condition. They suggest that life requires a delicate balance between introspection and participation, between silence and expression. This balance is not static but dynamic, evolving with the individual's circumstances and growth. Subramaniam's work invites readers to reflect on their own lives, encouraging them to find harmony between their inner and outer worlds. Her poetry suggests that withdrawal and engagement are not opposing forces but complementary aspects of existence. By embracing both, one can achieve a richer, more integrated understanding of life.

1.7 Conclusion:

To conclude with we can state, Arundhati Subramaniam's *When God is a Traveller* stands as a powerful meditation on the dual imperatives of withdrawal and engagement, illustrating that the journey inward is as vital as the journey outward. Through her evocative poetry, Subramaniam explores the intricate interplay between introspection and active connection, demonstrating how these forces enrich the human experience. Her nuanced treatment of themes such as spiritual inquiry, personal identity, and the quest for belonging creates a lyrical space that oscillates between solitude and immersion in the vibrancy of life.

By weaving mythological archetypes with contemporary realities, Subramaniam bridges the timeless and the temporal, showcasing spirituality as a dynamic and evolving process. Her verses embody the balance between detachment and involvement, revealing how both are essential for a holistic understanding of self and existence. *When God is a Traveller* invites readers to embrace the fluidity of human experience, showing that withdrawal and engagement are complementary forces that deepen self-discovery and connection. Ultimately, Subramaniam's work reaffirms the transformative power of poetry as a medium for navigating life's paradoxes and connecting with the world in profound and meaningful ways.

1.8 References

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