

The Importance of Familial Relations in A K Ramanujan's Poetry

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Abstract: A.K. Ramanujan was one of the foremost writers in Indian English literature who wrote poetry after the end of colonial period. He wrote poetry in English as well as in Kannada. He makes the Indian traditions of family life, rural India, its superstitions and way of life and Indian landscape the subject of his poems. His family relationship form a rich subject for his poetry. Memory plays a very crucial role in his poetry. He is basically a poet of experience and memories. His personal experience can be seen as the basis of most of his poems. There are a large number of themes in his poetry. The main motive of this paper is to bring out the importance of family relationships in some of his best poem.

Keywords: Memory, Childhood, Experience, Relationship.

Introduction

Attipate Karishnaswami Ramanujan was a leading poet of Indian English literature. He was a bi-lingual writer. All through his poetic career, he wrote poetry in English as well as in Kannada. He was not just a poet but also a translator. His many translations from Tamil, Kannada and Telugu earned him international popularity. His collection in Indian English poetry includes *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *The Second Sight* (1971) and *The Black Hen* (1995). He translated U.R. Ananthamurthy's novel *Samskara* from Kannada into English. He got Padma Shri award in 1976. The image of family is of paramount importance in his poems. He has said, "English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my "outer" forms – linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience, and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional occupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and the folklore give me substance, my "inner" forms, images, symbols." "I will seek and will find/My particular hell in my Hindu mind" is his motto. His poems are known for the unforgettable images, innovations in language, familial relations, ironic descriptions, Hindu familial theme, Indianness, nostalgia, fear and anxiety and a host of other things.

"The most delicate and luminous of his poems are those which picture experience of India and particularly his family life..."

(A.D. Diwedi)

His familial relationships form a rich subject for his poetry. His father gave him emotional and cultural roots. There are many other relatives that are sketched in his poems. A sketched detail of cousins, wives, daughters and aunts can be found in his poems. His poems like "*Small Scale Reflections on a Great House*", "*Obituary*", and "*History*", "*Of Mothers, Among Other Things*", "*Love Poem for Wife*", "*Routine Day Sonnet*" and "*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*" are rich in the subject of family relations. The poems are casual and ironic; often it seems deliberate so, as there is pathos and nostalgia hidden behind them. The emotion is never on the surface. It is cloaked by an ironic mask.

The poem *“Small Scale Reflections on a Great House”* could well be the most well known and oft-anthologized Ramanujan’s poem. The dominant theme in this poem is that of the relevance of family life and life in community. This poem records the poet’s attitude to the Indian joint family system tinged with irony. The “great house” is the central focus of the poem that absorbs everything that enters into it. The items that have their access into the house include the living and non-living things. The daughters, who go away from this house after marriage, come back. Their marital life is short lived. They are either deserted by their idiot husbands or come back as widows. The sons who go away return in some cases being reborn as grandchildren:

*“Nothing stays out: daughters
get married to short-lived idiots:
sons who run away come
back in grandchildren...”*

Dead people also return back to this house. The nephew who has gone abroad comes back dead. He is, probably, killed in the war. The plane, the train and the military truck bring him back to home:

*“...in the north, a nephew with stripes
On his shoulders was called
an incident on the border
and was brought back in plane
and train and military truck...”*

The stratification of Indian family is reflected adequately by Ramanujan in this poem and the greatness of the house is ultimately questioned.

Ramanujan’s poem *“Obituary”* is also a family based poem. This poem is based on the life of a typical Indian father. The speaker recalls the death of his father. He explains the tragic outcome on the family because of the sudden death of his father. The poem also shows that most of the middle class life is dominated by males in Indian society. Death and birth of his father is represented very ironically and is made trivial:

*“Like his Caesarian birth
In a brahmin ghetto
and his death by heart-
failure in the fruit market.”*

His poem *“History”* is a speaker’s conversation with his mother. His mother explains him the events that took place at his grand aunt’s death. The poet, in this poem, describes a family relationship where there is no love, affection and respect between parents and children, between grand aunt and her daughters. His mother tells him that when his “petite little aunt” died all their relatives were eager to remove her ear-rings, bangles, anklets and the toe rings from her dead body. This incident has a great impact on the speaker’s mind and heart. Now he feels that his family is not so noble and dignified. He does not feel proud as a part of this family.

The poem *“Of Mothers, Among Other Things”* depicts the life of an Indian mother. This is a poem of son’s love for mother. In this poem the poet remembers the youthful days of his mother during his childhood. His

mother has become very old and weak now. He compares her with a blackbone tree which is twisted but in past this tree was also young like his mother:

*“I smell upon this twisted blackbone
tree
the silk and whitepetal of my mothers
youth.”*

He compares her mother’s old and rough hands with the claws of an eagle. Her hands grew rough just because of the work she did for the family:

*“But her hands are a wet eagle’s
two black-pink crinkled feet.”*

The poem evokes the ideas of birth, survival and death. The personal tone in the first person depiction of the mother image merges into the impersonal world of reality.

Ramanujan’s poem “*Love Poem for Wife*” is a poem the subject matter of which is also based on family relationships. This poem is a brilliant summation of the modern Indian’s deep acceptance of the normative horizons of the western couple. This poem delineates a discord between an Indian husband and his wife in their marital life. The speaker’s father as well as his wife’s father has been dead for several years now. They do not have any information about their childhood.

“Really what keeps us apart at the end of years is unshared childhood” says the speaker to his wife in the beginning of the poem. In this line he tries to draw a contrast between the condition of his own life and the condition of his wife’s life. This poem pertaining to his family life concentrates on the “recollections of childhood”.

He visualizes his wife drawing a picture of the poet where he passes:

*“...From ghost to real
and back again in the albums
of family rumours, in brother’s
anecdotes of how noisily
father bathed,
slapping soap on his back...”*

In the poem “*Routine Day Sonnet*” Ramanujan also depicts familial relationships. Darkness enters the family realm when the wife “Cries her heart out”:

*“...But I wake with a start
to hear my wife cry her heart
out as if from a crater
in hell; she hates me, I hate her*

I'm a filthy rat and styr."

The poem "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" is a poem which is dominated by familial relationships. This poem recalls the innocent days of a premature girl of four or five and a little bigger boy of six or seven. The swing inspires them to climb a small big tree full of leaves. This poem is not just a recollection of an event. It is a childhood experience analysed from an adult perspective. The protagonist searches for something vogue and nostalgic. He remembers his childhood and also that of his cousin's. The cousin was his playmate. They used to sit together on the swing and climb a tree which was not very tall but was full of leaves like a fig tree. Putting a sudden end to pleasures his cousin got married and went to live in the city. She looked for a swing but could not find one:

*"Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it."*

A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is full of family themes. His poems focus on his individual relationships and their lasting effect on his poetic consciousness. Some poems assert and glorify his relationship with the immediate family members.

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