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A. K. Ramanujan and the Humanistic Concerns

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Abstract:

A.K. Ramanujan's colleagues in the university of Chicago, Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph, writes about the most distinguishing characteristics of his personality is his "humanity" and "modesty". As a man and a writer, he avoided loud and big gestures. He was preoccupied with the small, the insignificant and the everyday experiences. Ramanujan has descended from an orthodox Brahmin lineage and had firsthand knowledge about the hypocrisies that had polluted such an ancient and indigenous religion as the *Sanatan Dharma* or Hinduism. So as a poet, linguist, folklorist, translator and literary theorist, Ramanujan's lifelong endeavor was to make a more humane society and his poetry is a rich treasure-trove of his humanistic concerns.

Keywords – A. K. Ramanujan, Humanism, Indian Society, Modernism.

As an Indian Brahmin married to a Syrian Christian, living in Chicago, teaching Dravidian literature to foreign students writing simultaneously in three different languages, Ramanujan was truly a man for whom multiplicity whether linguistic, cultural or social, had been his fait accompli from his childhood. And he connects everything that he experiences in his poetry. In the present paper, I will attempt to trace his humanistic concerns in his poems.

Once Ramanujan is invited to eat some breaded fish which he is unable to because a frightening “hood/of memory like a coil on a heath” is revived in the mind of the poet. The fish rolled in bread-crumbs becomes for the persona an objective correlative to link the breaded fish in the present with the horrifying and grim memory of the sand-covered dead body seen long ago. He recollected in a flash of memory the miserable death of “a dark half-naked/length of woman” on the beach covered by a yard of cloth, washed up on the shore by the ebb tide. Indifferent attitude of the people towards the suffering of the weak moved the poet a lot. The poem reveals the poet’s suffering soul for the fellow beings.

Dehumanization of art is reflected in the poem “A River” by the poet. In the poem, the poet takes to task such sensation-mongering poets who cash-on at the expense of public distress and disaster. They are oblivious to the suffering of others. For them, poetry is no more than a mode of self-indulgence. At the onset of the poem, the poet gives us the picture of the river during summer months. The poet ironically points out that only a river in flood, roaring with its insatiable hunger for human lives, inspires the poets old, old and new alike. They find it possible “to be poetic about only once a year”, when the swelling river washes away “in the first half-hour/three village houses;/a couple of cows/ named Gopi and Brinda/ and one pregnant woman”. The poets are neither disturbed by the death of helpless cows, which are worshipped as the symbol of the “mother” in India, nor are they moved by the death, even before birth, of the unborn twins who kick at “blank walls”. In this poem, Ramanujan criticizes the inhumanity of modern Indians, especially poets, to the suffering of their fellow beings.

Ramanujan’s skeptical attitude to the inhuman tendency in the Indian society comes out more loud and clear through the poem “An Image for Politics”. In this poem, the poet draws a parallel between the animal and the human worlds by hinting at the fact that present-day politics is a similar game of devouring one another, till only one among several is left. The stronger politicians devour the weaker once, and in their turn are devoured by others stronger than them. Very ironically, the poet says that once he had only heard of such ruthless cannibalism, but has found it to be true in present-day politics. By comparing the politician to “cannibal/devouring smaller cannibal till only two equal giants are left”, the poet presents a horrifying picture of the power-hungry and blood-thirsty politics of today.

“Epitaph on a Street Dog” is a small elegy on the sudden and pathetic death of a street bitch. The fall of night attracts to her all her mangy suitors, who fight each other out to possess her. The result of this brutal misadventure is a litter of bald and blind puppies. Because they were born in such a great number, naturally

many of them become victim of malnourishment and die. We see here the poet's Bodhisatvik compassion for creatures, attractive or ugly.

Death of a commoner is a non-event for the world. In the poem "Obituary" the occasion is the death of his father. A Madras newspaper of no worth and standing published the news of his death in two lines four weeks later. The manner in which the persona searches for the "two lines" of obituary that he had heard been published in some inconspicuous Madras daily points to the poet's suffering at the apathy of the consumer market. The paper containing the obituary is treated as trash and "sold by the kilo/to street hawkers" and poet buys salt, coriander and jiggery in those newspaper cones.

In the poem "History", once again, the poet deals with the deterioration of humanity in the face of utilitarianism. Death, for the modern human being is, as if, a routine event of life. It is, rather, the material wealth left behind by the dead person which is of greater interest to them. The poem is an isolated piece of memory that the poet-persona recalls of the day his great-aunt died. He remembers vaguely having seen his "little dark aunt", the great-aunt's daughter, searching for something under the cot of her dead mother. Years later, poet is informed by his mother that the "little aunt" was really looking for the ornaments of her dead mother. The poet can then understand better the "stony" heartless daughter on the face of his little aunt. Thus, under the pathetic narration of a family incident, there seems to lurk the irony that highlights the meanness of human nature.

The horrifying nature of the sadism that modern man indulges in is pointed by the poet in the poem "Zoo Gardens Revisited". The horrifying details painted by the poet of visitors at the zoo setting fire to the tails of ostriches and feeding needle-induced bananas to the unsuspecting "dying-race of ring-tailed/monkeys" indeed questions the right of human beings to be called "human". That animals have lost faith in their evolved counterparts is evident in the fact that ostriches have done away with their proverbial habit of hiding their heads in the sand. Also, there is an inset story of a chimp called subbu who bites an aristocratic female animal lover, perhaps reacting against her hypocritical love for animals, which comprises more fashion stunts than genuine concern. Ramanujan satirizes the fads and fashions of modern science in depicting animal- protection as show-off and crossbreeding of animals as ridiculous. Thus, modern man has brought about disruption and destruction of the natural world.

The poem "A Minor Sacrifice" employs the mythological tale of king Parikshit followed by a parallel incident from his own childhood. Instigated by an uncle's killing of a scorpion, and on the inspiration of another boy called Shivanna, the boys plan to rid the world of scorpions. The initial requirements is, of course, an offering of "one hundred live grasshoppers/caught on a new moon Tuesday" minus their wings to "the twelve-handed god of scorpions". The children, accordingly, collect a hundred, maimed and wriggling grasshoppers in three stolen pickle-jars. On Wednesday next, Shivanna's mother informs of Shivanna's hospitalization and death due to "some strange twitching disease". The subtitle of the poem refers to the My Lai Massacre which occurred during the Vietnam War, and in which thousands of innocent Vietnamese were left maimed and killed by the American soldiers. Thus, the poem embodies Ramanujan's caustic comment on the senseless killings of innocents in the name of war that go on in the modern times.

Ramanujan paints a very dismal picture of India, especially during the post-independence period, through the poem, "Prayers to Lord Murugan". The poem which is divided into nine sections, is a series of ironic prayers to the ancient god asking for deliverance from the ills that beset modern man. The poem starts with an invocation of the god, and then goes on to allude to various attributes and physical features of the deity. With the praise of each attribute of the God, the poet urges the Lord to cure a fault in modern man by the exercise of that particular power. The poet laments over the loss of religiosity in modern life. The prayer has ceased to be the instrument of spiritual upliftment and redemption. The poet, as if, prays to Murugan on behalf of degenerated humanity.

In the post-independence period, instead of the enchantment of true knowledge and scientific achievements as promised by the attainment of freedom, pretension ("our blood is brown; our collars white") and false pride ("the peacocks we sent in Bible/ to Soloman") has become the order of the day. Instead of the useful recycling of waste material by scientists in space ships, we see the stunt of a politician who drinks his own urine for longevity. The poet desperately prays to Lord Murugan to rid man of such religious and social pretensions and to restore good sense in him. The poet feels that Indians have descended from their genuineness as human beings and have become victims of false identities and self-aggrandizement. What is badly needed is genuine love for religion, and a return to the basic values of life. Critics have found echoes of Eliot's *Wasteland* in Ramanujan's "Prayers to Lord Murugan", and not without reason.

Ramanujan is totally preoccupied with the possibilities of a spiritual reawakening after a moral death. He talks about the possibility of a spiritual reawakening after a fall from morality in the poem, "Fear No Fall". The poem is the narration of the spiritual transformation of the Tamil saint, Arunagiri. Legend had it that the saint, having squandered his youth in thriftiness and extreme immorality, at last finds himself bereft of friends and health. His misery becomes unbearable, "His despair, deeper than his wounds", he throws himself down from a hilltop. But he awakens only to find himself lying on the lap of a compassionate Old Man, cured of all his sores. The Old Man, who is actually the Lord Murugan, gives him the first line of a hymn and then disappears. Thus, the poet ends the poem with a message to all humans:

...Fall, fall,
 You'll never fear a fall again,
 fall now!

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