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A.K. Ramanujan's Engagement With Hinduism - A Blend Of Intimacy And Detachment

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A.K.Ramanujan, an expatriate academician taught in Chicago was never cut off from his connections with his native Indian tradition, feelings and Hindu ethos. His poetic sensibility is a fusion of Western ideas and Indian national ethos. Being a highly talented and perceptive poet, he is quite responsive to his surroundings and has the realization of the East to apply to it the high voltage drama of life in the West. His poetry divulges, in some way or the other, his skeptical awareness of Indian myths and legends, Indian history and her glorious past, her varied customs and rituals, her integrated joint families, her religion and philosophy. However, for describing all these he uses irony, wit, understatement.

A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is deeply rooted in the consciousness of his Hindu heritage, even as it is shaped by his life as an expatriate in the West. Hinduism, with its myths, rituals, family structures, and cultural codes, forms the background against which many of his poems are written. In spite of his long stay in the U.S. he never forgot his roots in his native Indian culture and especially his Hindu heritage. He frequently resorts to native themes and tradition. His three 'Hindoo' poems "The Hindoo Who Reads His Gita", "The Hindoo: He doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either" and "The Hindoo: the only Risk" are essentially Indian in background and treatment, thought and tradition. They take us to the core of the Hindu philosophy, to the Gita. What makes his engagement with Hinduism unique is the blend of intimacy and detachment. On one hand as a born Hindu he belongs to it. And on the other hand, as a person settled in the US he seeks to find his roots in it; yet often views it with the critical distance of a modern intellectual.

His poems such as “Conventions of Despair”, which explores the internal conflict of an Indian educated in the West but intensely connected to his Hindu heritage, “Prayers to Lord Murugan”, which compares modern skepticism and societal loss with traditional ideals, asking for the restoration of the senses and a connection to fundamental human values, “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House”, which recalls an ancestral house which had been a true embodiment of old culture and tradition and “Snakes” which reconnoiters themes of memory, fear, and cultural identity, reflecting on personal experiences entwined with post-colonial influences reveal the multiple dimensions of this engagement. In such poems, Hinduism appears not only as a religious system but also as a cultural inheritance that defines identity, memory, and belonging. Family rituals, ancestral homes, mythological figures, and village superstitions are evoked with exactitude, serving as both personal recollection and cultural document.

Ramanujan was extremely aware of the strength and limitations of his Hindu ethos. On the one hand, he admired its absorptive capacity — its ability to preserve, reinterpret, and carry forward traditions across generations. The poem "Zoo Gardens Revisited" demonstrates his respect for Hindu ethos by invoking Hindu deities like Vishnu, Narasimha, and Varaha to invoke their benevolent protection for the zoo's inhabitants, blending Eastern and Western mythology into a universal theme of divine care. He is in a crossfire pulled between the elemental pressures of his Brahmin Hindu race, his native ethos and the aggressive Chicago beauty. Ramanujan is equally alive to the strengths and the deficiencies of his Hindu ethos. He shows his awareness of the great absorbing power of his Hindu faith by picturing a typical joint family in “Small Scale Reflections on a Great House”. The poem “Snakes” highlights one of the superstitions of the Hindus. “Prayers to Lord Murugan”, which is dedicated to Lord Murugan, the ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth and beauty, war and love has a direct bearing on the Hindu way of worshipping. In the poem “In a Zoo” towards the end he resorts to prayer to various Hindu gods in which a number of manifestations of Lord Vishnu are recalled. Lord of lion face is Narasimha who delivered the world from the clutches of Hiranya, the tyrannical father of the great devotee Prahlad. ‘Boars out’ refers to Varsha, who lifted the stolen earth from the waters and thus freed it from the demon-thief. The poet also prays to Matsya who according to Indian myth rushed to the rescue of Gajendra from the jaws of a powerful crocodile. Many of his poems in *Second Sight* display Ramanujan’s knowledge of the execution of the Hindu myths and legends, gods and goddesses. “The Difference” is the best example for this. In this poem he mentions of “The Hindu Soul at Death” and brings into sharp focus the myth of Lord Vishnu who assumed the shape of “The Dark one”-ie, the Vamana God-who appeared before King Moradhvaj as a beggar to test the latter’s generosity and charitable manner. The king demanded just three steps of land. With his three steps, the Lord measured heaven and earth and the underworld.

Ramanujan who is aware of the strength of his Hindu ethos also admits the weight of the constraints of Hindu ethos, whether in the form of superstition, rigid customs, or the burden of inherited values. His poem "Obituary" can be quoted as an example for this which shows the father's death within the customs of Hindu culture, highlighting a sense of duty and tradition. Chitrlekha in her essay says, "'Obituary" poignantly captures the raw emotions following his father's death, highlighting the emptiness one feels when searching for solace in traditional rituals" (126). This ambivalence often finds expression in his verse: a simultaneous pull of reverence and resistance.

Ramanujan transformed his Hindu past into poetry that echoes universally. Myths such as those of Hindu Gods and avatars such as Vishnu, Narasimha, Varaha, or Vamana are not merely retold but reinterpreted, allowing them to serve as metaphors for human struggle, memory, and identity. In his poems, "Mythologies 1", "Mythologies 2" and "Mythologies 3", the mythical tales are retold. "Mythologies 1" and "Mythologies 2" relate to the incarnations of Lord Vishnu "Mythologies 3" relates to Lord Shiva. "A Minor Sacrifice" is another poem on Hindu myth and legend. In this poem Ramanujan narrates the story of King Parikshit and his son Janamejaya which describes how the king earned a curse - "an early death by snake-bite" by killing a snake to garland a sage in a forest. The King's son, Janamejaya performed a sacrifice: "A magic rite/ That draws every snake from everywhere" (Ramanujan 144).

Many poems in *Second Sight* display Ramanujan's deep engagement with Hindu myths and legends. "The Difference" is a striking example, where he contemplates "the Hindu soul at death" and retells the myth of Vamana, the dark dwarf incarnation of Vishnu, who humbled King Moradhvaj by asking for three steps of land. With those steps, the Lord encompassed heaven, earth, and the underworld — a reminder of the boundless reach of myth in shaping human imagination. In "Twenty-four Senses" he mentions the twenty-four senses, which the Hindus speak of. In "Smells" he talks about the Hindus who offer rice to crows and to Brahmans on ancestors' death days.

"The Hindoo Who Reads His Gita" depicts two contending sides of Hinduism in the speaker: the non-involvement, "Yet I come unstuck and stand apart", and a superior sense of detachment, "I do not marvel when I see good and evil", and this is further substantiated by the following lines:

I have learned to watch lovers

without envy

Or memory as I'd watch under a lens

houseflies rub hands or kiss, I look

at wounds calmly. (OIR 79)

In the poem “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day” he tries to juxtapose ironically the ancient Hindu ethos with the situation of the modern Hindu. The poem “I Burn and Burned” explores the conflict behind the poet’s expatriate sensibility and the inner compulsions of the inherited Hindu heritage. In “Twenty-four Senses” he mentions the twenty-four senses, which the Hindus speak of, suggesting a heightened or spiritual awareness beyond the conventional five. In “Smells” he talks about the Hindus who offer rice to crows and to Brahmans on ancestors’ death days.

Ramanujan who by saying, “I must seek and will find / my particular hell in my Hindu mind”, expresses his fascination with his Hindu past in “Conventions of Despair” reveals that his personal struggles are rooted in his Hindu identity. Yet, finally, he turns away from both the modern and the inherited “conventions of despair”. He rejects both the superficial “modern” way of coping, and the conventional Hindu ways of dealing with despair. He chooses an “archaic despair” — a timeless, existential truth that transcends culture and era.

The tension born of Ramanujan’s inherited dual culture finds vivid expression in the poem “A Plant”. The poem serves as an objective correlative for the poet’s inner conflict, caught between the tug of his Tamil heritage and the demands of the Chicago milieu. Yet, his Tamil roots prove resilient, strong enough to withstand the disquiet of American living. In “Still Another View of Grace”, a love poem, this cultural tautness is transmuted into art, where his eloquent phrases capture the unsettling clash between the elemental pull of his Brahmin ethos and the allure of Chicago beauty — “the fire in the marrow of a woman.” Here, familial, cultural, and moral constraints crumble under the heat of passion.

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No, not only prophets
walk on water. This bug sits
on a landslide of lights/and drowns eye-deep
into its tiny strip
of sky” (CP 3).

On the whole A.K. Ramanujan's engagement with Hinduism is a mixture of intimacy and detachment. His Hindu ethos is characterized by a subtle preoccupation with his Indian heritage, often expressed through irony and a blend of traditional and modernist perceptions. His poetry features wealthy depictions of Hindu culture, rituals, and mythology and at the same time deals with the impact of modernity and the cultural clashes faced by diasporic individuals.

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