



## A Critical Appraisal of A.K.Ramanujan's Poetry

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### Abstract:

Of all Indian English poets Ramanujan is exceptional. His poetry is characterized by a deep crisis of sensibility. It is due to his exposure to the rationalistic West and his roots lying deep in Indian nativity. His poetry is mostly self-probing with ruthless interrogations. The poem 'River' dramatizes the poet's journey from innocence to experience. The poem 'River' represents the clash between tradition and modernity. Ramanujan's poetry of familial memory gives us much that is of human interest but remains, restricted to the social plane of experience. He dreamt of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' with all cults and cultures. Unfortunately, his premature death cut off the possibility of his reaching the very tap-root of his heritage.

### Introduction:

Indian writing in English achieved authentic selfhood of its own. Beginning from pre-independence to the post-independence era it has grown deeper with cultural currents. Iyengar rightly observes: "We have seen that the base for Indian writing in English is much wider and stronger today than at the time of independence. Its true literature is the creation of sundry gifted individuals"<sup>1</sup>.

In India, the post-Independence era presented a shocking sight of poverty and misery. The Indian mind was deeply disturbed by the great betrayal of faith. The whole atmosphere was charged by a revolutionary spirit. This modern revolt was represented by the later generation of poets – Nissim Ezekiel, A.K.Ramanujan, Kamala Das, and many more poets. The post-independent poets made a decisive divergence from idealistic tradition and romantic ideology, to confronted social reality. M.K.Naik points out: "Politics ceased to be an idealistic pursuit and was reduced to a power game, and the new gods of self-aggrandizement and affluence easily dethroned those of selfless service and dedication to a cause. The era of hope, aspiration, and certitude was gone, an age of merciless self-scrutiny, questioning, and ironic exposure commenced"<sup>2</sup>.

Of all Indian English poets Ramanujan is exceptional. His poetry is characterized by a deep crisis of sensibility. It is due to his exposure to the rationalistic West and his roots lying deep in Indian nativity. He presents a torn mind caught between two cultural polarities. According to Emmanuel Narendra Lall: “Both evaluations corroborate my thesis that Ramanujan’s poetry is the expression of his poetic sensibility in which the Indian subjectivity coalesces with the western objectivity. In other words, his Indian heritage and experience inspire his poetry, which is given speech and form based on English poetic traditions”<sup>3</sup>.

Ramanujan in his search for nativity roots shakes every idea and institution, which generates inheritance. He refuses uncritical acceptance. As an alienated young man, he says: “I resemble everyone but myself.” This implies a struggle to redeem his identity attended by a rigorous re-evaluation of tradition, representing the modernist revolt. Makarand Paranjape rightly observes: “The new generation which had come of age in the 1950s and 1960s found itself betrayed by its elders. It was impatient for change and fed up with the platitudes of the past... A whole generation turned its back on tradition and found itself alienated in the new India. Secondly, they declared themselves opposed to the idealism and romanticism of their predecessors. They wanted poetry without escapism and flights of fancy, written in clear, hard, unsentimental voice, and everyday language... they wrote about the city and its dirty poverty-stricken, and dehumanizing environs.... They believed they were alienated from their society and irony was the only way of expressing their ambivalence towards themselves and their world”<sup>4</sup>.

The poem “A River” represents the perfection of Ramanujan’s creative achievement as a poet. It is a bold and searching study of the human predicament conceived in routine and change. In his novel Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, the American novelist, assigns a profound and powerful role to the River – Mississippi. T.S.Eliot calls it “The strong brown God” while Lionel Trilling considers it as a highway towards freedom. The river dramatizes the protagonist’s journey from innocence to experience. But, by contrast, Ramanujan’s “River” is neither a divine agency nor an elemental power. It is the very image of life caught between continuity and change.

It represents a multiplicity of metaphors and modes. A variety of motifs go into the meaning and structure of the poem. Ramanujan undermines the traditional notion that the river is a nourisher and preserver of life. It is on the contrary the cruel death dealer. The poem opens with the dried state of the river symbolizing the hollowness within:

*Every summer*

*A river dries to a trickle*

*In the sand*

The trickle speaks of the poverty that permeates the entire life process. Nature very hesitantly doles out just the trickle. The insufficiency creates a traumatic existential battle. Life becomes a contest between living and dying. The river exposes its interior; the very stirrings of life have gone dry and barren revealing the inner sand and stones. The sleepy crocodiles and shaven buffaloes create a sense of the grotesque. They are the ugly obstructions to the imagination of the river. Ramanujan creates an illusion of reality and affirms reality as the unalterable experience of life. The river bears its sandy ribs symbolizing the unfed and

uncovered faceless masses exposing their lifeless ribs. It reveals a subhuman state of existence – a typical Indian rural reality.

The subsequent lines of the poem provide a powerful study on the condition of Indian womanhood.

*Straw and women's hair*

*Clogging the water gates*

*At the rusty bars*

*Under the bridges with patches*

*Of repair all over them*

By juxtaposing straw with women's hair, Ramanujan creates a trifling sense of a woman's life – the insignificance of her existence. The hair clogging the water gates speaks of her victimization over the centuries. She has been held captive within the stranglehold of custom and social regimentation. The worn-out rusty bars hold tight the women's hair. The patches of repair and reforms do not create a change. Ramanujan introduces the motif of floods against tradition's existing passivity and routine. Floods symbolize the oncoming modernity and change with an uncontrollable speed. People start talking about its alarming intrusion:

*People everywhere talked*

*Of the inches rising,*

*Of the precise number of cobbled steps*

*Run over by the water, rising*

*On the bathing places.*

*And the way it carried off three village houses,*

*One pregnant woman*

*And a couple of cows*

*Named Gopi and Brinda, as usual*

The trauma of change creates unusual havoc. The crop and the cattle of the village are carried away. The pregnant woman symbolizing creativity and motherhood is undermined. The traditional life of farming gets disturbed. Gopi and Brinda, the milk-giving cows carrying folklore and mythology are drowned in the floods of modernity. Ramanujan attacks the poets who are not affected by the floods. They are at a safe and respectable distance:

*In Madurai,*

*City of temple and poets*

*Who sang of cities and temples*

Ramanujan exposes the cruelty and indifference of poets towards human calamity and suffering. He criticizes the romantic ideology and self-seeking system of life. Hence the poem is dominated by the images of 'stone' and 'sand' symbolizing the very sap of life that has gone dry.

The river represents the clash between tradition and modernity. Bruce King aptly observes: "Ramanujan is neither a nostalgic traditionalist nor an advocate of modernization and westernization. He is a

product of both and his poem reflect a personality conscious of change, enjoying its vitality, freedom, and contradictions, but also aware of memories that form his inner self, memories of an unconscious 'namelessness' which are still alive, at the foundation of the self"<sup>5</sup>. Ramanujan's poetry ruthlessly exposes the cosmic and cultural indifference.

"Another View of Grace" is one of the well-knit poems of A.K.Ramanujan. In this poem, the poet gives vent to his feelings of emotion and love for his beloved. On one hand, some conservative people have traditional views about love and marriage, but on the other hand, we see the poet's passionate attitude about love and marriage. In the long run, there is a great breakage of the age-old rules and regulations of rites and societal principles. The manner of the poem is very beautiful and suggestive. The poem begins with the image of burning. The poet is in love with a girl. But the chains and shackles of society constrain him to go forward in love. On the other hand, the beloved is also helpless under patriarchal domination.

The poet says:

*I burned and burned. But one day I turned  
And caught that thought  
By the screams of her hair and said. Beware  
Do not follow the gentleman's morals.*

The description here is a natural description of the emotion of a young boy who can catch the thoughts or feelings of the beloved by the screams of the hair or who can shudder to the 'bone at hungers that roam the streets'. The repetition of the word 'burned' shows the urgency of action or the degree of burning. Here, the 'burning' has been metaphorically used. It suggests the burning of love and passion of an average youth who is in deep love with a girl. The phrase 'gentleman's morals' suggests a conservative society's morals, restrictions, and principles. The poet instigates his beloved to break the rules of customs and tradition. In a fit of passion, he flings irony on the institution of marriage. He thinks that the main purpose of marriage is to procreate legitimate issues. So, he asks the beloved to find a priest and get herself married with any 'beast in the wind' for husband:

*Find a priest. Find any beast in the wind  
For a husband. He will give you a houseful  
Of legitimate sons. It is too late for sin.*

Here the poet's attitude to marriage is very ironic. He feels that marriage is only meant for procreating a houseful of legitimate sons. Look at the word 'son'. The poet never uses the word 'daughters'. As a matter of fact, in Indian society, the place of sons is more important than daughters. Right from the beginning of the universe up to this modern age, women have been the passive sufferer of men's dominations, A.K.Ramanujan thinks that after marriage, it is generally seen in Indian society that the role of a married woman falls flat if she is unable to bear a male child. In this stanza, the words 'houseful', and 'legitimate' are ironic. They fling irony on the exceeding population of India. They show how illiterate people are quite a in haste to reproduce children. Such type of husband has been compared to a beast by the poet: "Find any beast in the wind for a husband".

The poet has also an animal passion for the beloved. He said, “I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the streets/beyond the constable beat”. Here the term ‘hungers’ seems to suggest sexual passion this passion is free to roam in the street and it is beyond the constable beat. The term ‘constable beat’ suggests the rules and regulations of the society, the norms, and principles about love and marriage. The poet is very much aware of the helplessness of his beloved who has been brought up in a patriarchal frame of society where women have very little to play in the affairs of men. But one day the poet sees his beloved in a very gloomy state upon the dusty road. The poet says:

*.....But there she stood  
Upon that dusty road on a might light April mind  
And gave me a look. Commandments crumbled  
In my father's past. Her trembled hair suddenly known  
As silk in my angry hand, I shook a little  
And took her being the laws of my land.*

The poet says that he is so much overpowered by the emotions of love that he little cares for the principles of society. The term ‘dusty road’ seems to suggest the burdens of the woman, her cares and anxieties, and above all, her marginalized and meaningless place in society. Though she has a dream of her own, it can not flourish and bloom. The month ‘April’ is a symbol of gusto and joy. But here the gusto and joy of the woman have been choked and subdued.

Another serious limitation of the Hindu view of life is exposed in “The Hindoo: He reads his Gita and is Calm at all Events”. It is the impossible ideal of accepting both good and evil, joy and sorrow in an equal spirit. The speaker in the poem has learned not to marvel, “when I see good and evil,” alike. He can watch lovers without envy as I'd watch in a bazaar lens houseflies rub legs or kiss.

He can also “look at wounds calmly”. However, he declares in the end, yet when I meet on a little boy face the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat I choke, for ancient hands are at my throat.

Is the poet trying to suggest here that despite all his traditional training as a Sthitaprajna (“the man of tranquil wisdom”), he is profoundly disturbed when he finds that in life, sometimes elemental innocence becomes a sacrificial victim, and realizes that this strange law of life is more ancient than the most ancient of religious systems”.

There is a great danger inherent in this idea of the ‘Sthitaprajna’, as “The Hindoo: the only Risk” points out. The danger is that the perfect equanimity of this ideal may easily degenerate into indifference. Just to keep the heart's simple given beat through a neighbor's striptease or a friend's suicide

*not to be caught*

*dead at sea, battle, riot, adultery, or hate*

*At the bottom of all this bottomless*

*enterprise to keep the heart's given beat*

*the only risk is heartlessness*

Highly critical of many aspects of his Hindu heritage as Ramanujan is, he is by no means blind to some of its stable virtues. He admires its strong faith in the unity of all life and contrasts this with the dichotomy between 'Man and Nature' and 'Man and the lower creation' which the Western tradition appears to make. "Christmas" is an evocative statement underlining this essential difference between oriental and western cultures. In contrast, the tree seen out of his window in India is far more than merely a stiff geometrical shape standing all aloof. The poet feels that "I am limed / on branches bare as roots,/with that latest/hatch of birth – bewildered parrots". This feeling makes him assert the oneness of all life on earth – human, animal, and vegetable: "For a moment, I no longer know/leaf from parrot/or branch from root/nor, for that matter,/that, tree/from you or me". The same thought occurs to the Hindu in "A Hindoo to His Body". After his death, he wishes to "rise in the sap of trees" and "feel the weight/of honey-hives in my branching and the burlap weave of weaver-birds/in my hair"<sup>24</sup>.

The poet also appears to view favorably the great absorbing power of his traditional culture. "Small-scale Reflections on a Great House" stresses this aspect of it, by making the familial motif a symbol of the larger theme of the Hindu heritage. The poem describes a large, traditional Hindu joint family, a great house in which

*nothing*

*that ever comes...goes out.*

*Things come in every day*

*to lose themselves among their things*

*lost long ago among*

*other things lost long ago*

And also, "anything that goes out/will come back processed". "Ideas behave like rumors,/once casually mentioned somewhere/they come back to the door as prodigies/born to prodigal father, with eyes/that vaguely look like our own". Furthermore, "Nothing stays out: daughters/get married to short-lived idiots;/sons who run away come back/in grand-children". Even those who die "as far away as the Sahara/half-gnawed by desert foxes/or in a border-skirmish up north" are brought here for their last rites. Despite the slightly ironic tone employed throughout this description, the final impression is one of admiration and an ironic tone. It is like defense against this admiration developing dangerously into sentimental adoration. It is equally clear that the 'great house' in the poem may stand for the ancient house of Hinduism, 'the house that Krishna, built' – a house which in its motto of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (i.e. the entire earth is one family) has absorbed from time to time numerous cults, culture, and races to create one of the greatest examples of synthesis in all human history.

## Conclusion:

Ramanujan's poetry of familial memory gives us much that is of human interest but remains, severely restricted mostly to the social plane of experience alone, seldom attempting higher or more subtle evocations. Ramanujan's articulation of the Hindu ethos has also mostly been produced with a few notable exceptions like "The Hindoo: He reads his Gita and is Calm at all Events" and "The River" poetry of the periphery and not exactly the center of the Hindu experience. A long and ambitious poem like "Prayers to Lord Murugan" ("Ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war, and love") raises by its thematic implications a serious probe into spiritual concerns, but is seen to be confined to the surface irony of the contrast between the present and the past as in "Master of red blood strains/our blood is brown;/our collars white;" and "Lord of the twelve right hands/why are we your mirror men/with two left hands/capable only of casting reflections?" The strategy of the ironic anti-climax in lines like "Lord of headlines/help us read/the small print./Lord of the sixth sense/give us back/our five senses/... Lord of the last born/give us birth" is no doubt diverting, but it creates a feeling that the poet is simply using Lord Murugan as a peg to hang his ironic flourishes on.

This only indicates that Ramanujan was yet to come fully to terms with his heritage and was still feeling the way. Meanwhile, it must certainly be conceded that he has effectively demonstrated to his contemporaries the supreme importance of having roots, and has also revealed glimpses of the vitality the work of a poet acquires when he succeeds even partially in this attempt. Unfortunately, his premature death cut off the possibility of his reaching the very tap-root of his heritage.

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