

A Review Study on Varied Themes in the Poetry of A.K Ramanujan

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This review paper aims at highlighting the theme of Indianess in the poetry of A.K Ramanujan. Ramanujan's views on culture, Indianness and Western metaphysics are randomly scattered in his writings also and they provide vital clues to the complex configurations of tensions that sustain his poetic universe. In the essay *Parables and Commonplaces*, he dilates graphically, for the first time, on culture and the related issues. He begins with the premise that cultural encounters "lead to definition, redefinition, a dialogue with the other where each returns to himself, refracted even alienated and thereby redefined."¹

When it comes to deliberating on the Indian context, Ramanujan underscores its terribly perplexing plurality and also its attendant constraints in his essay *Classics Lost and Found* where he observes:

Indian tradition is not a single street or a one-way street, but consists of many connected streets and neighbourhood... India does not have one past but many pasts.²

Ramanujan is basically a poet of memories. Of all the memories, the ones that are anchored to his familial, personal past make his poetry very redolent with the characteristic native element or the Indian experience. In

fact, his alienation finds a consolatory transformation in his vivid, subtle and innumerable remembrances. All his poetic collections present him as the poet of umpteen incidents, relations, situations and experiences that are closely associated with his family in relation to his own self.

In an interview, Ramanujan significantly observes:

Indians are writing poetry about what they know, about their experiences.

They are not imitating British poetry.³

This observation holds good in the case of his own poetry too. It gives us a cue. Ramanujan first began to write in his first language, Kannada. In this initial stage, he was fully involved with Kannada literature because many of his literary friends were Kannada writers whose writings he naturally read even in manuscripts. Along with Kannada, he knew Tamil as well. This dual interest persisted with him even in his later poetry. His recent translations from the two languages testify his rootedness. The native element contained in them, in addition to his personal experiences, has seeped into his poetry originally written in English.

Ramanujan's poetry reveals his Indianness in unmistakable terms. Despite the overt Western influence, particularly in the use of ironic mode, the typical Indian experience forms the core of his poetry. William Walsh observes that he is "unlike Ezekiel, deeply possessed of, or by, the Indian ethos and psyche in its pure Hindu form." A cursory glance at Ramanujan's poetry makes it clear that it is pre-occupied with five basic postulates which constitute what we may call Indianness: (i) search for the self, (ii) family concerns, (iii) unified vision of life, (iv) myths and legends, and (v) peculiar Indian milieu.

The poem, *Elements of Composition*, incorporates a range of materials from various cultural sources. There are the statues of the Indian temple dancers, symbolic of the way in which some arts can give permanence to motion. The speaker is composed of such ‘elements’ as a father’s seed, his mother’s egg, the elements of air, fire, water, chemicals. The composition of elements becomes a part of the world of continual change, decomposition, and this is the only constancy of life. The poem graphically details the composition of the poet’s physique and its subsequent decomposition. Like others, the poet is made of his ‘father’s seed and mother’s egg’ as well as of earth, air, fire, and largely water:

Some of the poems on native themes, such as, Ramanujan’s three Hindoo poems, *The Hindoo, he does not hurt a fly or spider either*, *The Hindoo: he reads his Gita and is calm of all events* and *The Hindoo, the only Risk* are essentially Indian in background and treatment. They take us to the care of Hindu philosophy, namely to the Gita. The poem *A River* focuses attention on the role of the ‘Vaigai’, river of Madurai, a South Indian city in its destructive power. *A Hindoo to his Body* shows the body is as important to a Hindoo as the soul. Some other poems like *Small Town, South Indian, Old Indian Belief* and *Prayers to Lord Murugan* have a direct bearing as Indian way of living, Indian belief and prayers. The last mentioned poem is dedicated to Lord Murugan, the ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war, love, having six faces and twelve hands.

Indianness also lies in the philosophic view of oneness of life. Indianness perceives a close affinity between human life and life in nature. “The Indian mind”, says Tagore, “never has any hesitation in acknowledging

its kinship with nature, its unbroken relation with all.” One of Ramanujan’s chief concerns is to perceive and establish a link between human beings and nature.

The theme first appears in *The Striders* (1966) and in an early sonnet called *Towards Simplicity*, which represents the body as a natural mechanism. In the poem, Ramanujan sees a resemblance between the human body’s internal seasons and those in the world of nature, despite the fact that whereas the body’s processes are minute and complex, those in nature are large and simple. The body includes the mind. At the time of death, the body consumes the mind with all its reasons—an unIndian idea, of course—and is, in turn, consumed by the earth, representative of nature. *Death and the Good Citizen*, written nearly twenty years after *Towards Simplicity* and included in *Second Sight*, also dwells on the connection between body and nature. Bruce King observes:

His Indianness is part of his past, [with which] he is inextricably linked as he changes and develops.⁴

Like his biological past, the poet’s cultural past continues to live. It is all the more palpable in Ramanujan due to his frequent visits to India in addition to his continued intellectual preoccupation with Indian culture in the U.S.A. S. Nagarajan’s statement about Ramanujan’s “uprootedness” since he is a “marginalized” man sounds commonplace and naïve:

The poet is haunted by a sense of irrecoverable loss and of the transitoriness and insubstantiality of his uprooted life. It is the poetry of the marginal man par excellence.⁵

Nagarajan has surely missed the essential Ramanujan. Nagarajan's view about Ramanujan's "alienation" is similar to S.G. Jainapur's:

There is a deep sense of alienation in his poetry.... He felt intensely about his cultural roots when he began to live on alien soil. This seems to have pushed him back to a Hindu ethos in his poetry.⁶

These commonplace statements of critics only betray a lack of proper understanding of the complex genius of Ramanujan who has successfully brought together the Indian and the Western sensibilities.

The typical Indian milieu finds its effective portrayal in Ramanujan's poetry. It reveals his essential Indianness more than anything else. *Poona Train Window*, for example, offers a series of visual images of the familiar life in the Indian countryside:

Three women with baskets
on their heads, climbing
slowly against the slope
of a hill, one of them
lop-sided, balancing
between the slope and
the basket on the head
a late pregnancy.

Buffaloes swatting flies
with their tails.

(CP: 80-81)

In spite of his constant exposure to American beliefs and culture, A.K. Ramanujan has consistently written about India-not as an obsession, but as a source of inspiration. While recreating the human situations and details of

Indian life, the image of family appears as a key image. It helps the reader understand and appropriate the meaning and beauty of such poems.

References

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- (2) A.K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (ed.) Vinay Dharwadker. New Delhi: OUP, 1999. p. 187. (Referred to as *CE* in the text).
- (3) A.K. Ramanujan, In an interview with *The Times of India*, Sunday, January, 20,1980, p. 13.
- (4) Bruce King, *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 1991.p.8.
- (5) S. Nagarajan, “A.K. Ramanujan” in Tracy Chevalier (ed.) *Contemporary Poets*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991. p.786.
- (6) S.G. Jainapur, *Poetry, Culture and Language: Indo-Anglian Poets from Karnataka*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1987.pp. 108-09.