

## **A CRITICAL STUDY OF A.K RAMANUJAN AS A POET**

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### **Introduction**

My paper aims at studying, reviewing and interpreting the poetic gems of A.K Ramnujan as a poet and to present his spectrum of poetry from a broader angle resulting him proving as a poet par excellence. To study him as a poet in nutshell will support the objectives laid down for the study.

A.K Ramanujan, a linguist, poet and scholar was one of the greatest intellectuals of India who settled in USA where he experienced rootlessness, isolation and loss of identity. In order to search his identity in roots in India; he began to compose poetry as an outlet for his isolation and loneliness. He reminisces about his roots in India, especially in his Tamil upbringing. The proposed study aims at elaborating the spectrum of his poetry and his craftsmanship. His poetic output is slender, consisting of *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Second Sight* (1986), *Collected Poems* (1995) and *Collected Poems and Prose* (2000), but what he has written is conspicuous for inherent poetic worth.

Ramanujan was a great scholar and intellectual who was well versed with Tamil and Kannada Poetry, linguistics, South Asian languages and civilizations, English and American literature, both eastern and western philosophy. As a poet, Ramanujan was influenced by T.S Eliot as regards variety and complexity in poetry. Like T.S Eliot's poetry, his poetry is also complex both in subject matter and expression. Ramanujan treats his poetic experience mainly through irony and paradox. His wide learning and razor sharp intellectual brilliance are also reflected in his poetry in the form of allusions from unusual sources of knowledge, derived from philosophy, psychology, science and linguistics. There are echoes of Indian mythology, images and symbols in his poetry. His interest in the anthropology of language and forms of communication is noteworthy. His interest in South Indian folktales also exercised great influence on his poetry.

A.K Ramanujan's poetry is permeated with Indian experiences. Like many Indian writers living abroad, it is the Indian experience that nourishes Ramanujan's poetry. Ramanujan carries inside him a rich store house of experiences and memories from India and he reviews them and relives them from time to time and brings them into contact with the present experience.

A.K Ramanujam loves his family very much. He brings to his poetry an authenticity of experience which finds powerful expression in his family poems, characterized by all pervasive irony. Some of his finest family poems are *Small-Scale Refelction on a Great House, Of Mothers, among other Things, Still Another View of Grace* etc. The self in Ramanujan's poetry dissolves itself in the experience that the poet undergoes in the world. The poet's self is an objective reality, an all pervading presence which resembles "everyone but myself". Some of his poems on self are *Self Portrait, Second Sight, The Watchers* and *Looking for the Centre*.

A.K Ramanujan's conception of love is comprehensive in the sense that it is not confined only to the love between man and woman or husband and wife. His love poems also describe his deep and profound love for his parents and other relations. *Obituary* and *Of Mother, among Other Things* are dedicated to his father and mother respectively. *Still another for Mother, Lines to a Granny, Looking for a Cousin on a Swing, Small Scale Reflections on a Great House* commemorate his love for his near and dear ones. In some of his poems like *Love Poem for a Wife-I, Love Poem for Wife-2* and *Love Poem for a Wife and her Tress*, he deals with marital love.

Ramanujan was a great and gifted poetic craftsman. His poetry is precise, accurate and highly imaginative. His entire poetry is image- oriented. He often gives us imagery which is not only visual but also auditory and kinetic. He uses simple and common words with epigrammatic terseness and classical simplicity and lucidity. He uses mostly mono syllabic words in order to impart musicality and liquidity to his poetry. Irony is one of the most remarkable poetic devices in his poetry.

The use of myths and legends is a paramount characteristic of his poetry. Although he was physically alienated from India, the land of his roots, he was well versed in the knowledge and the use of her myths, legends and rituals. His use of myths and legends is vivid and accurate and suggests of strong leaning for irony. He uses the myth of lord Vishnu in *The Striders* and that of Lord Murugan in *Prayers for Lord Murugan*. The myths of Narsingh, Varaha add suggestiveness to *Lord of Lion Face* and *Boar Snout* respectively.

Thus, in the proposed study the researcher would discuss the spectrum of Ramanujan's poetry and his craftsmanship.

## **Literature Review**

**Surjit S. Dulai. (2005):** Said that while it is certainly true that Ramanujan's harking back to Indian experience has always played a fundamental role in the shaping of his poetic sensibility and the content of his poetry, as a whole his poetry embraces realities extending far beyond the boundaries of his native land. His poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experience on the one hand, and that between his sense of his self and all

experience on the other. Its substance is both Indian and Western. Starting from the center of his sense of self and his Indian experience, his poetry executes circles comprehending ever-wider realities, yet maintaining a perfectly taut connection between its constant, and continuously evolving, central vision and the expanding sense before it.... Ramanujan's poetry neither stays in one place nor leaves, its vision remaining constant and the circle of this vision constantly growing.

**M.H. Abrams. (2002):** A myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives.

**In an interview with Chirantan Kulshrestha, he (2001):** Elaborated on his technique and talks of the obsession resulting in penning a sequence of poems, variations on a theme, as in a sonnet cycle. "Often these poems take similar forms, share a vocabulary, a repertory of symbols, voices."

**Jahan Ramazani. (1998):** Opined that he liked the post colonial or migrant subject, torn out of one cultural context and inserted into a new one, the eye that blinks the new head or the heart that beats in a new chest cannot always adapt with ease to its new surroundings.

**S.S. Dulai. (1989):** Opined that His poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experience on the one hand, and that between his sense of his own self and all experience on the other. Its substance is both Indian and Western. Starting from the centre of his sense of self and his Indian experience, his poetry executes circles comprehending ever-wider realities, yet maintaining a perfectly taut connection between its constant, and continuously evolving central vision and the expanding scene before it.

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**Satish Kumar. (1997):** Reviewed that K.N. Daruwalla has very high opinion about Ramanujan's poetic craftsmanship: Ramanujan's imagination is always focused and never diffuses. His language is razor-sharp. His poetry is both delicate and intricate as the spiral line of

a shell. He brings to his poetry an authenticity of experience but the experience is seized through a perspective of the past, a configuration of familial relationship and his ironic perception.

**C.L.L. Jayaprada .(1996):** Said that on the basis of the stylistic analysis of Ramanujan’s poems, one can say with confidence that he is a remarkable and original craftsman. His predominantly nominal style, with the use of concrete nouns wherever possible, renders a visual quality and terseness to his poetry.

**Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph. (1993):** Reviewed that A.K Ramanujan is “both trans-national and sub-national, capable of the ‘most sophisticated universalism even while remaining rooted in micro humanity, regional culture.

**The Indian Express. (1993):** Opined that A.K. Ramanujan is a well known Kannada poet litterateur and eminent translator.

**The Statesman. (1993):** Reviewed that A.K. Ramanujan is remembered him as a “well known Kannada litterateur, poet and guide.

**Bruce King. (1991):** Reviewed that his poetry is rich in images and cultural echoes-words reflect and interact with other words- a wide variety of associations from more than one culture and from various historical periods.

**Bruce King. (1991) :** His Indianness is part of his past, [with which] he is inextricably linked as he changes and develops.

**Chidananda Das Gupta. (1983):** Put forth that the poet in him is not obvious but has to be gradually discovered.

### **Objectives of Study**

A host of critics and reviewers have passed their critique on him and covered a vast area of his poetic craftsmanship and other feathers of his poetry. For drawing conclusions which are expected the following objectives of the study are laid down:

- To discuss the spectrum of Ramanujan’s poetry and his craftsmanship
- To present a fresh interpretation of the facts already known about A.K Ramanujan’s poetry
- To critically analyze the opinions of the scholars, academicians, writers, reviewers and critics.
- To review the poems and pass authentic, critical and comprehensive remarks on his poetry.
- To establish A.K Ramanujan as a poet as a poet par excellence

## **Hypothesis**

The proposed project is based on the hypothesis that A.K Ramanujan has evolved a highly polished, refined and artistic poetic craftsmanship for the expression of his poetic gems which are closely associated to his family and historical past. He has evolved a new idiom and technique for the poetic expression of the diaspora sensibility.

## **Discussion**

Among the Indian poets writing in English, A.K. Ramanujan stands out as a unique figure for his substantial contribution to the growth and development of Indian English poetry. As an expatriate, with a sense of commitment, he finds his roots in the native ethos and tradition. He has carved a niche for himself by combining diverse stands and themes. Besides, the immense influence, Ramanujan's father had on him, he is also greatly influenced by Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Further, in a number of poems, Ramanujan successfully fuses the forms and tropes derived from poets like William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and W.B. Yeats with the tradition of ancient Tamil and medieval Kannada poetry. Kannada poet Adiga influenced his poetic sensibility.

A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is a union of the various sights, sounds and other aspects of nature, as he had perceived them and the historical, philosophical and mystical attitude with which he has responded to them. It is this synthesis of his perception of the external world with the world of his inner imaginative response, which lends an extraordinary meaning to his poems.

Ramanujan's inherent genius enabled him to amalgamate the critical and rational outlook of the West with the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the East. Though he had stayed for a long time in the United States, his poems strongly exhibit his warm associations with the East. In spite of his Western footing, A.K. Ramanujan has never ceased to be an Indian, which is both his asset and liability as a poet.

We can understand Ramanujan's poems in terms of a constant problem that comes up in the discussion of colonial and post-colonial literatures, the relation of the present to 'roots'. Ramanujan does not ignore this problem; as an Indian living in the United States and as someone of Hindu stock married to a Syrian Christian he is certainly conscious of it. His poetry blends the technique and conventions of European, Indian, American and British literatures, with those of Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit. His poetry develops out of Ramanujan's own emotions and experience but is well polished by many revisions and is intellectual in its range of ideas and use of philosophical concepts.

Ramanujan's poetry, thus, becomes the reflection of the poetic self's predicament, wherein the need for relating oneself to history and tradition stands face to face with the contemporary milieu, whose main modes—the continuity of tradition, myth, literature and family—are largely sterile. While resolving this tension arising out of the conflict between the need for a mythic tradition and an outer intellectual and social predicament, his poetry could have ended up with noting greater than the nostalgia about a presumably glorious past. But with a great deal of skill, he could fuse the essential Indian sensibility with the temper of modernity and rescued his poetry from becoming merely nostalgic. He looks at 'modernization' in India as a movement from the context sensitive to the context free.

In Ramanujan's poetry, one finds no detachment, as in Ezekiel's from neither the Indian scene, nor the anxieties of the expatriates found in Parthasarathy's. What one finds in it are the combination of the sensibility peculiar to the Indian spirit and the sharply ironic and skeptical view of the actualities and surfaces of life. His felt alienation from the immediate environment thus becomes a source of continuity with an older ideal.

A significant achievement of Ramanujan is that he has repossessed and made available in English language his deepest roots in the Kannada and Tamil past. This is how his poetry with home as its central force succeeds in maintaining a vitally Indian sensibility. Here the image of home becomes a unifying force among individual and tradition, emotion and intellect, and past and present.

As a talented critic, A.K. Ramanujan evolved the definition of poetry and expressed his views on the significance of language as a medium of poetic expression. His interest in linguistics, Tamil Classics and folklore forms the bedrock of his conception of poetry and linguistics. His linguistic approach was derived from his knowledge of native Tamil, English and Sanskrit. His conception of poetry and poetic craftsmanship had been influenced by the tradition of folklore and myths and images from epics—*Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*. He had definite views on the use of language in poetry.

As a post-colonial critic, Ramanujan envisages that translation of the great texts of Sanskrit and Tamil and other literatures will take place along with the development of new literatures. He says, "so internally, too, Indians have to discover one another's languages and cultures" (*UCP*: 60). As an exponent of synthetic linguistics, he wants that languages should attain innovation and enrichment by close contact with one another.

According to Ramanujan, poetry is made of words, which are "like objects; they have a sound; a look" and reveal the very personality of the poet. Words have an elastic quality, which is found in the individual twists and turns that a poet gives to them in order to express his emotions, ideas, feelings and fancies in his own peculiar way. So the words assume newness and innocence, and translate into imagistic patterns the inner thought movements of the poet. So image is an important element in Ramanujan's poetic credo.

Ramanujan's poetic credo reflects his Indianness. As a poet and theorist of poetry, his approach is both extrinsic and intrinsic. He defines Indianness and compares it to Western ethos. He defines what is oriental about India and thus, corrects the Western notions about it. He was an illustrious indologist, who taught Americans and Westerners what Indology really means.

Ramanujan believes in the continuity of cultural traditions, which passes into modernity. To Ramanujan, Indian culture is an alive culture. He never compromises his Indianness. It moves comfortably even in U.S.A. His interest in Indianness is unsurpassable, but he was equally interested in American culture and environment. Indeed, to him, Indianness and Americanness are "the two lobes of his brain" (CE: 36). He assimilates the cultures of his native land (India) and that of the land of his migration (U.S.A) and successfully brings alive the indigenous transition and culture in his works. He has made a multicultural commitment and transcended the limitation of an expatriate poet. Further, central to Ramanujan's vision is continuity, past and present, tradition and modernity acting on each other endlessly. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that cultural reversal and displacement results in "the binary opposition, the Western intellectual's longing for all that is not West, .....the so called non-west's turn toward the West."<sup>6</sup> Ramanujan is unique in his ability to contain within himself the binaries, explaining the East to the West and the West to the East with perfect equanimity.

Ramanujan's themes are inevitably influenced by the pressing predicament he faces. His poetry in the process becomes the arena where the need for relating oneself to history through tradition confronts the reality and immediacy of the contemporary milieu. The face-to-face encounter often results in a combination of the sensibility peculiar to the Indian spirit and the sharply ironic and skeptical perception of the harsh realities of life.

Indianness also lies in the philosophic view of oneness of life. Indianness perceives a close affinity between human lives in nature. To perceive and establish a link between human beings and nature is also one of Ramanujan's chief concerns. The theme first appears in an early sonnet called *Towards Simplicity*, which represents the body as a natural mechanism.

Ramanujan's experience of love is wide and tense, and his sensibility is sharp and modern. Evidently, he has traversed a vast expanse of love experience and given us a fresh and firsthand account thereof. He starts with a statement of true nature of love, moves through its different aspects – longing, frustration and despair, infatuation, promiscuity and sensuality – and arrives at the secure and sure heaven of wifely love. These different aspects of love are scattered over his poetical collections.

Ramanujan is a talented poetic craftsman, who has assiduously polished and refined his poetic style. He has achieved rare felicity of expression and classical simplicity and austerity. He uses apt and meaningful, simple and everyday words with utmost economy and epigrammatic terseness. His images are suggestive, real, precise and sculptural.

Thus, Ramanujan uses myths, legends and rituals to varied use in his poetry. By doing so, he enriches the texture of his poetry. Myths, in particular, help him contrast the ideal and the actual, and project the complexities of life. By the use of irony and mocking tone, however, he underlines the sterility of myth in the contemporary world of senses. Unlike traditional poets, he does not believe in the life-affirming value of myths and legends, though he shows his awareness of their symbolic value and meaning. His knowledge of Indian myths and folklore is amazing. And he makes use of myths and folklore as themes in his poetry. And it is in this aspect that his poetry conforms to the norm of post-colonial literature.

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