



Indianness in the poetry of AK Ramanujan

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Abstract

Indian writings in English have always presented India, its culture and people in most of the works. These works always had a sense of longing for one's motherland. India can be seen presented with all its shades, bright or dull. The poetry of A.K. Ramanujan belongs to this tradition. Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan's reputation is well established as a world's foremost folklorist, linguist, translator and a sagacious intellectual. And as a poet, he is not only a representative figure of the post-independent Indian English poetry, but also a seminal representative spokesman of the third world Diasporas. His credit lies in his remarkable ability to maintain a considerable balance between tradition and modernity. This paper is an attempt to study how this poet looks back at his Indian past and presents it through his power of words.

Keywords: motherland, ethos, modernity, culture, family

Introduction

The study of A.K. Ramanujan's poetry shows him as a distinguished Indian English poet. In his poetry there is a fusion of rich tenets of his native culture and the detached outlook of the Western thoughts. To read any of Ramanujan's poem is to be charmed by his wit and a language which owes its superb energy to an 'enacting eye'. He is neither a nostalgic traditionalist nor a champion of modernism. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel and Jayant Mahapatra define the contour of Modern English poetry. The Hindu heritage has coloured his poetic output profoundly. Ramanujan's poetry "reflects a touch of humanity, Indian ethos and pertinence of life."

Despite A.K. Ramanujan stayed in America, he never forgot his mother and motherland and always lived in the reminiscences of Indian culture. His poems prove that he was pulled by his culture and motherland again and again. His poetry proves that his heart was deeply rooted in Indian culture and society. S.S. Dulai stated about Ramanujan,

"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. It's substance is both Indian and Western."

His poetic self presents a unique blend of the traditional and the modern. If his sensibility is rooted in the Indian heritage, his vision is definitely that of a modernist. His poetry makes it clear that it is steeped in true Indian sensibility. If we examine his poetry word by word it will reveal to us his Indian sensibility, in his search for self, his family concerns and his philosophical view of life, use of Indian myths and legends and his invocation to the Indian milieu in all his complexities. Ramanujan is a kind of Indian who is not carried away by western expectations that all Indians must have a second sight. He rather wishes to regain his first sight.

"As we enter the dark
Someone says from behind.
You are Hindoo, aren't you?
You must have second sight."

In Ramanujan, poetry seems to grow out of Indian experience with all its memoirs of family, local place, images and beliefs. His poetry shows how an Indian poet in English can derive strength from going back to his roots. For a poet like Ramanujan to let go the fairy tales is to let go the entire childhood with its varied images. So in the poem 'Why I can't Finish this Book' the poet declares:

"Letting go
Of fairytales
Is letting go
Of what will not
Let go:

Mother, grandmother
The fat cook
In the window's white
Who fed me
Rice and orges"

In poem after poem, he goes back to his childhood memories and experiences of life on South India. At the same time it shows a modern stance with its skepticism, ironies and sense of living in a changing world. His poetry "reflects the Indian mode of experiencing an emotion and the western mode of defining it."

Ramanujan's poetry is full of Indian ethos, while being very much a part of the world of modern ideas, international travel, and rapid cultural changes. Ramanujan not only dealt with Indianness in a revivalist manner, but as a past from which he grew, a past which remained a part of himself. He sounds

Buddhist when he urges:

“No, no, give me back my archaic despair:
It’s not obsolete yet to live
In this many lived lair
Of fears, this flesh”

The Indian way of life to see all things as one and the same is presented in the poem ‘*Christmas*’:

“For a moment, I no
Longer know
Leaf from parrot
Or branch from root
Nor, for that matter,
That tree
From you or me.”

Even while staying in Chicago, the poet poetically remembers India, as he says:

“But where I come from
Things are timed
Differently.”

Indian milieu is also described in his family poems. In the poem ‘*Small Scale Reflections on a Great House*’ the scene of a typical big Indian house is presented. This poem is based on the memories of the poets’ big house, “*nothing that ever comes into this house goes out*”. In the house cows were given a name, encouraged to breed under elder’s supervision and girls hiding behind windows with holes in them:

“.....encouraged
To get pregnant in the broad daylight
Of the street under the elders’
Supervision, the girls hiding
Behind windows with holes in them.”

The girls were not allowed to watch all this. There were unread literary books, attacked by silverfish which grew in numbers among old books. The entire scene presented in the poem is of a typical Indian house.

In Ramanujan’s poetry we get a glimpse of typical Indian joint family and the same is presented in the above mentioned poem.

“Sons-in-laws who forget
Their mother, but stay to check
Accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces”

Similar scene is presented in the poem ‘*Of Mother Among Other Things*’. It is a beautiful poem in which he remembers the silk and white petal of his mother’s youth, her ear-rings with three diamonds in them. Her mother’s responsibility is that of traditional Indian mother. She has to look after her child as well as do household jobs:

“From her ear-rings three diamonds
Splash a handful of needles
And I see my mother run back

From rain to the crying cradles.”

The mother is trapped by her obligations to her family like a mouse caught in a trap. She becomes a timid, docile being like a mouse. There is no way of escape from the cage she has built around her. The mother’s soaring ambitions are now crippled.

“Her sarees
Donot cling: thy hang, loose
Feather of a one time wing.”

Indian rituals also find a considerate place in this poetry. In the poem ‘*Obituary*’ the ritual after cremation is presented. After the cremation, the ashes of the father are taken by the sons to:

“Throw as the priest
Said, facing east
Where three rivers met
Near the railway station.”

The phrase “*as the priest said*” represents a typical Indian belief in tradition and superstition.

In the poem ‘*A River*’ the poet reminiscences his Tamil culture. Madurai, earlier, was the city of temples, symbolizing the spiritual culture of man. It was the city of Indian ethos. The temple is a graphic image for it represents a paradigm of Indian culture. But now:

“Every summer
A river dries to a trickle
In the sand
.....
Shaven- water- buffaloes lounging in the sun”

Thus the poet talks about the onslaught of westernization which affected the Indian culture. He sand of the pregnant women and the couple of cows which the flood carried away. Madurai was initially a city of culture, where the poets drew their inspiration from its spiritual heritage. But now due to the modern impact it has started disintegrating.

While dealing with Indian ethos, Ramanujan naturally touches Hindu ethos. The presentation of Hindu culture and rituals is abundant in his poetry. His ‘*Hindoo Poems*’ showcase very clearly how this poet deals with the theme of Hindu culture in his poems. His three Hindu poems are, ‘*The Hindoo: He reads his Gita and is Calm at all Events*’, ‘*The Hindoo: He doesn’t Hurt a Fly, or a Spider either*’, ‘*The Hindoo: The only Risk*’, are the reflections of his Hindu consciousness. The poem ‘*The Hindoo: He doesn’t Hurt a Fly, or a Spider Either*’ ironically demonstrates the kind of ‘gentleness’ the Hindus possess:

“It’s time I told you why
I’m so gentle, do not hurt a fly.
.....
Why, I cannot hurt a spider
Either, not even a black widow.”

His portrayal of mother giving farewell and advice to the

grown up son departing for America evokes a true Indian picture in the poem 'Images':

“Mother’s farewell had no words,
No tears, only a long look
That moved on your body
From top to toe
.....
With the advice that you should
Not forget your oil bath
Every Tuesday
When you go to America.”

In Ramanujan’s poetry we find ample references to Indian past and mythology. By evoking admiration for the myths and legends on the Hindu gods and the way of life, he has glorified the cultural heritage of India. Perhaps Ramanujan’s poetry is an answer to the charge laid down by McCutcheon,

“There is little that is specifically Indian in the background and imagery; the rivers and the mountains are all generalized.....the themes and attitudes too are modern European.”

Ramanujan presents a true picture of his native land. He is not biased or partial in doing so. Thus it is easy to agree with Shirish Chindhade, who notes that:

“...images of dirtiness, ugliness, dilapidation, seems to outnumber the pleasant ones when Ramanujan remembers India.”

In Indian culture children are mostly regarded as a near essential ingredient of a full marriage relationship. Ramanujan disappointed in his wife, gets emotionally attached to his children. The issue of safety of a girl, which is a major concern in the modern era, could also be seen in the age old poetry of Ramanujan. One of the 'Entries for a Catalogue of Fears' is about his fear regarding his daughter’s safety:

“Sudden knives and urchin laughter
In the red light alley
And now
The men in line
Behind my daughter”

A.N. Dwivedi feels that autochthonousness is one of the distinguishing features of Ramanujan’s poetry. He notes that,

“Indian myth and history, her people and customs, her rich cultural and spiritual heritage: these form the dominant themes of his poetry.He rather frequently resorts to native themes and traditions.”

Mr. Lall also agrees with the view when he remarks that, “His poems take their origin in a mind that is simultaneously Indian and western; therefore they succeed in opening more passages to India.”

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