

Between Two Worlds: Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan

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Caught in the crosscurrents of two cultures- the Indian and the Western- Attipat Krishnaswamy Ramanujan, an American citizen with a deeply rooted Tamil sensibility is able to write of exile feelings in an idiom morphed by nativised sensibility and a homebound vision. Ramanujan born in Mysore in 1929, is a trilingual writer who shows his mastery equally in English, Tamil, and Kannad. While English is the language of his creative works, Tamil and Kannad are the media of translation. He has left behind an illustrious legacy of his poetry with which he will always live as 'a poet of India' and more importantly simply a poet. Though he has been living in the United States long since, he has not forsaken his Indian heritage and sensibility. He was a poet, short story writer, translator, linguist and folklorist—all rolled into one.

Ramanujan, who lived in India and finally settled and died in the USA makes his poetry vibrant with the images of city. Madurai and Chicago serve as the repository of his images, which not only render to his poetry a tensional quality but also reflect upon the pangs of being a poet, constantly haunted by the forces of the two worlds- one alien, the other native. Ramanujan's poetry intends to celebrate the vastness of life by considering the city and its associated images as the manifestation of body. His life is caught in the crossfire between the elemental pulls of his native culture and the aggressive compulsions of the Chicago milieu. One side, the metaphor of the family with its ineluctable inner filiations, and on the other, the self-forged prison of linguistic sophistication.

Living in the ambience of alien culture, Ramanujan has been constantly haunted by the memories of his experiences. This is one of the ways of overcoming the burdens of the life lived in Chicago. It is also one way of legitimizing his identity to escape from the burdens of identity crisis in Chicago. In his *Collected Poems*, Ramanujan expresses life style in the city as mechanical, exilic and no freedom at all. The sophisticated shallow urban life that is at once mechanical and parasitical is enveloped by pretensions and fabrications. Nostalgia, family relationships are central to Ramanujan's poetry. Ramanujan's reflections centre round a cousin, a mother, a father, a wife, an in-law, a brother, a joint family etc. Indeed Ramanujan appears to write about these with a poignant feeling, which only an expatriate cherishes in an alien country. The childhood, the past and the familial relationships peculiar to the Indian society provide the foundation for his poetry.

A remarkable absence of sentimentality usually makes Ramanujan's poetry distinctive. The strategy employed to desentimentalise the recurrent evocations of Indian milieu could be seen mainly in the non-human imagery of his poetry. His preoccupation with his Tamil past, Tamil roots, both linguistic and cultural, defines his regional identity. He clings to "a tradition very much of this sub-continent. The deposits of which are in Kannada and Tamil and which have been assimilated into English". (Mohanty, *Indian Literature* Vol.237, No.4 Jul-Aug 1994)

Spending the entire life time in the USA and marrying a Syrian Christian, Ramanujan could relate himself to his own familial cultural past in the Southern India. Ramanujan knew it well that this was the only way to retain his identity in the exilic Western world. He could repose a lost past in a language which is not his own. He could do it with success because he drew his strength and sap from the Tamil linguistic tradition.

Ramanujan admitted that English and his professional disciplines like linguistics and anthropology gave him his 'outer forms' and his preoccupation with Kannad and Tamil, the classics and folklores gave him his 'substance', his "inner forms, images and symbols". Ramanujan's poetry embodies a deep sense of Hindu heritage, partly by harping on his familial South Indian experiences and partly by his sincere attempt to nativise English in terms of bringing in closer to the classical Tamil and Kannada literature.

As a 'son of the house' or even as an impassioned home-bound pilgrim, Ramanujan never fails to repossess the memories of his father, mother, uncles, aunt, cousins, relations. He recollects them with such minuteness of details in terms of their dress, behavior, attitudes, that one is often tempted to consider him as a poet of family and roots. His poetry reflects a characteristic pattern of beginning with an event or observation in a family, relating it to the context of Hindu life in tradition and elevating it to a metaphor or symbol, which in fact, embodies the quest for his personal identity. He tries to build up an inscape of his own self, preserving at the bottom the usable memories of his own family. This settles down the scores of Ramanujan's tension as an expatriate poet. In poems like 'Obituary', 'Elements of Composition', 'Snakes', 'Still another for mother', 'Love poem for wife', 'History', 'Ecology', 'Lines to a Granny', 'Love poem for a wife and her trees', 'Real Estate' Ramanujan re-lives his familiar experiences partly to do away with the fear of being faceless and partly to reclaim his past.

The Striders, the first book of poetry by Ramanujan that came out in 1966 contains such beautiful poems as *The Striders*, 'Snakes', 'Bread and Fish', 'A River' and 'An image for Politics'. This recommended volume immediately establishes Ramanujan as a poet of striking imagery and perfect language with an eye for the specific physiognomy of an object or situation, as the noted Indo-English poet R. Parthasarathy puts it evidently "Ramanujan is a poet of concrete details and excels in craftsmanship."

The poem 'Still another for Mother' mixes memory and desire, the past and the present. It begins with a consideration of "that woman/beside the wreckage van/on Hyde park street" (*Collected Poems*, 1995, p.15), who does not allow him 'rest' and who

looks like 'some friends' 'mother' and ends with the memory of the poet's mother and her black-pillared, nineteenth century silent house:

... something opened
In the past and I heard something shut
In the future, quietly, Like the heavy door
Of my mother's black-pillared-Nineteenth century
Silent house, given on her marriage day
To my father, for a dowry. [p.16]

"Looking for a cousin on a swing", tells about the peculiar sensation felt by a premature girl of four or five and little older boy of six or seven while they were on a village swing. After this sensation, they climbed a small and leafy tree and did the rest in utter innocence. Very wittily, the poet informs us that the same girl now having grown into a full-blooded mature woman lives in a city and goes in hunting for companions of her passion:

Now she looks for the swing in cities
With fifteen suburbs and tries to be
Innocent about it.

(The *Collected Poems*, p.19) Ramanujan is striking when he portrays the typically Hindu conventions or consciousness. The poem 'A Hindu to his body' demonstrates that the body is important to a Hindu as the soul :

Dear pursuing presence,
Dear body:
You brought me
Curled in womb and memory

... ..
You brought me: do not leave me behind.

(The *Collected Poems*, p.40)

For a Hindu, the body is a source of dharma. A sense of wonder in looking at and into things and situations of living mark the making of Ramanujan's sensibility and vision. It compels him to come to terms with his own self. In 'Self-portrait' Ramanujan makes it quite explicit that his insightful depiction can take him from the foliage to the roots. This poem gives not only a self-portrait but it also shows the use of another interesting theme in his poetry: self-analysis. No doubt, the impression one gathers is that of an uncertain self. It is characteristic of the modern man to subject himself to self-scrutiny and self-search. The mirror presents a picture, which is that of another. This duality of reality is reflected in this poem. In other words, the mirror not only helps to reveal his external, physical appearance but it also penetrates to his inner self, the self of self-recognition.

Another recurrent theme in his poetry is his awareness of the contrasted cultural patterns in East and West. Since he remained rooted in his native culture, he looked at the West with the eye of a South Indian Brahmin, nurtured in his traditional customs and values. The objectivity, which Ramanujan achieves in poetry, is the product of his

long stay in Chicago and of his insightful awareness of his native culture. Chicago could physically alienate him from south Indian environment and because of this distancing it could create an awareness in him to look into his long lost Indian experiences with a certain coolness and objectivity. Thus, even when he falls back on familial past, the poet's tone remains unsentimental. He looks at the past as one does at an album of photographs after long years. Once one learns to look into the self objectively, whatever that self recreates becomes an objective artifact. Therefore, in the case of Ramanujan, there is no either or situation. Whatever he is today, or whatever is his achievement it is because of the interaction, absorption and synthesis of two cultures i.e. the East and the West and integration of two forms or substances, 'the inner and outer'. Chirantan Kulshrestha observes:

In Ramanujan's poetry passivity becomes an essential precondition for suggesting the inexhaustible potential of the self: it is a positive state of being which allows the self the necessary freedom and transparencies to manipulate subjective and linear time, use personae, bring the equations into a vivid focus by interacting memory and time and even observe itself as an object. (Mohanty : 1993, pp 167 - 180)

There is no doubt in the fact that Ramanujan's vision was constantly growing encompassing into its fold diverse exponential realities encountered in the East or in the West. It is true that in the bulk of Ramanujan's poetry, the number of poems involving his Indian experience outweighs that of the poems involving his American life. Viewed from an Indian perspective, Ramanujan's poetry is found to be critical. He is not very much happy about the urban settlement in Chicago. Yet, Chicago could give him some memorable incidents- a life worth living.

In Ramanujan's 'Love poem for wife I' the description of Chicago becomes very much casual:

Only two weeks ago, in Chicago ,
You and brother James started
One of your old drag-out fights
About where the bathroom was
In the backyard.
North or south of the well
next to the jackfruit tree
in your father's father's house in Apleppy. (p.66)

In 'One more after reading Homer', Ramanujan images forth debilitating violence and danger that go hand in hand in the urban America and more so in Chicago. Such dehumanizing and stupefying elements dangle in the air, leaving room for calamities of indefinable proportion to rush in. In this poem Ramanujan depicts:

Neither Paris not Cassandra but only in curious
Cat I come upon a half-burned shoulder blade
Greening in a lake of dead alewives. I wonder
If in Chicago too love in difference and hate is
Some devious way relate at all to deaths by fire. (p.66)

In “Take care” Ramanujan’s warnings about the life that is lived in Chicago bespeak his moral judgement and Indian ethics. The tone of voice throughout the poem remains tentative and casual and perhaps this is the surest and most subtle way of handling irony- Ramanujan’s forte.

The poet unfurls a carpet of imagery that he depicts - helplessness and insecurity of an individual in the city. The poet gets concluded with the image of hectic life in Chicago.

In Chicago do not walk slow
Find no time to stand and stare
down there, blocks look black.
And white, they look blacker. (p106)

Actually Ramanujan’s poetry throws no hints on his preferences either for the Oriental or the Occidental tradition or culture. It only projects the poet’s preferences for a wider, global and humanistic culture based on scientific perception and direct approach to reality. Since no exclusively oriental or religious clues seem to help the poet break through the confining barriers between various values, the poet comes to realize that empirical and intellectual insight are the only means to the redemption of human predicament in a new universal culture based on his perception of human unity.

The poet is looking for a cultural milieu of universally reconciling and integrating values for a meaningful and rewarding human existence. If at all he is in search of roots, as his works suggest, it is the search for the roots of the human self. Ramanujan is a good example of how a background of native culture and ethnic roots enables a creative artist to write well on an alien soil. He is able to survive the fate of an exile, because he has never given up his native roots.

Whatever be his minor limitations, Ramanujan is an Indo- Anglian poet of remarkable authenticity and individuality. It is difficult and pointless to trace the impact of a particular poet in Ramanujan. He is a poet of considerable achievement, is a very attentive student of the art and craft of poetry. Very few poets in the Indo-Anglian milieu today equal him.No other poet has shown the ability to organize his experience into language as competently and as uniquely as Ramanujan. Ramanujan’s best work has the quality of a quiet strength arising from deep emotions held under artistic restraint and an acute awareness of the abiding values of Indian culture, Hindu religion and Indian life in general. Indian civilization encompasses great variety and complexity are reflected in Ramanujan’s English poetry through a refined sensibility. His verse can be interpreted as poetry of reverse romanticism, because the poet is working in the background of multi-folded alienations, having been deeply entangled in different cultural and ethnic roots. This much can be said emphatically that Ramanujan, despite being in possession of a modern sensibility, a modern outlook and attitude to life, remains rooted to his culture.

Notes and References

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