

Indian Life, Culture And Sensibilities: Reading Of A.k. Ramanujan's Poetry

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Sensibilities refer to the emotional impression, susceptibility and sensitiveness of an individual, integrated as a Cultural domain. The moral and aesthetic ideas unify to draw the complete picture of Indian life and sensibility. Poetry is perhaps the most exquisite sensibility which is equivalent to the ability to respond and appreciate the complex influences both physically and psychologically. Indian life pertains to the composite awareness of all diversities in the terms of race, region, religion, language and literature. As a significant link in the chain of Modern English Literary tradition, A K Ramanujan has an essence of nativity with universal appeal. Being an Imagist, he successfully highlights the typical Indian imagery not only in language but also in its soul. He considers himself as the Hyphen between 'Indo-American' representing the lingering nostalgia of a Diaspora.

Kaumudi Singh

Department of English and
Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow. 226007
Email - kaumudi09.lu@gmail.com

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan is a linguist, an anthropologist, a translator (from and to Tamil, Kannada and English) and poet in two languages (Kannada and English). He was born in 1929 in Mysore, studied in Pune and became a Professor in the University of Chicago's South Asia Programme. He is known globally, inter alia, for his depiction of Indian sensibilities drawn from Indian life and culture. His interest in Indian tradition is deeply rooted and traced back to his childhood. More austere in style than his fellow 'Indo-Anglican' poets like Dom Moraes and Nizzim Ezekiel; his sensibilities reject spirituality and abstract systems, and views personal experiences through intellectual, philosophical and psychological prisms. With the establishment of Universities in Colonial India, triggered creative writing emerging large number of writers in 19th Century; Toru Dutt's "The Lotus" and Henry Derozio's "To the pupil of Hindu college" are poems of free thinking and tolerant attitude. In tracing the history of English Poetry in India, Aurbindo Ghose is a remarkable figure, wrote about Indian ethics and mythology: "Savitri". The modernist among whom Ramanujan finds his place is bit uncomfortable as the Aurbindonian verse are grandiloquent and rhetoric in figuration. R. Parthasarathy, Ezekiel and P. Lal along with Ramanujan form an Imagist Group in the tradition of Indian English Poetry with ironical and clear-cut writings.

Bruce King introduces Ramanujan as:

And then there is Ramanujan, a Brahmin, yes, perhaps the world's greatest scholar of the languages and literatures of Southern India, but married to a Syrian Christian and for most of life a professor in an American University. When he cooked for himself he was a vegetarian, when invited to a conference in Paris he ate all kind of gourmet food as he felt he should experience the world.

Ramanujan was an anthropologist, who studies language in society as well as an expression of Indian culture which results in an important reference book of Indian Folklore. A linguist is essentially a translator to peep into the scope of language, as an example of which he translated verses of the twelve Vaishnavas of Tamil Nadu of 7th and 8th century, "Hymns of the Drowning" the notable work of Bhakti poetry in South India. Another work of translation is "Speaking of Siva", the vachanans of Kannada tradition is the must to look for those who are willing to explore the Dravidian style of writing poetry. His English works of repute include "Striders" (1966), "Relations" (1971), "Second Sight" (1986) and "Collected Poems" (1995). He

classifies his poetry into two zones as inner form and outer form of writing which stands for the familiarity with Sanskrit, Kannada and Tamil and his professional engagement with Linguistics, Anthropology and English respectively. Both this form often merges together which is no way preventable by a multilingual poet like him. He and Saul Bellow were in the same committee at University of Chicago, as Ramanujan was a literary person with social conscience; this became the base of affinity between the two renowned writers. Ramanujan's stance on cultural performances is quite reflected- Robert Redfield and Milton Singer coined the term 'Great Tradition' (involving the ancient pan-Indian Sanskrit texts) and 'Little Tradition' (local, oral, carried by folk). He argued that these terms need to be re-assessed. Thus, he says:

Written and hallowed texts are not the only kinds of texts in a culture like India's oral tradition. "Cultural Performances" of every kind, whether they are plays, rituals, or games, contain texts, written and oral. In a sense, every cultural performance is a text in itself.

Classical Tamil tradition of Sangam poetry and Modern English poetry of Imagism and Irony is the merging of inner and outer; personal and political rather 'aham' and 'puram' as suggested by the concept of Objective-Correlative(T.S Eliot). Ramanujan as a poet is par excellence and salient features in his poetry make him remarkable in the canon of Indian English poetry. Masking of feeling in irony, impersonalizing the personal, high degree of inter-textuality inculcates a practical approach towards culture and tradition. There is unique amalgamation of traditional and modern elements with striking imagery and perfect language. Being an expatriate poet, he is modern and rational but his firm faith in religion is extraordinary. It is evident through Ramanujan's poetry that he has a comprehensive knowledge of Indian mythology. Ramanujan in his poem, "Zoo garden revisited" describes various incarnations of God who took birth as animals:

'Lord of Lion face, boar snout, and fish eyes,
Killer of killer cranes, shepherd of rampant elephants,

devour my lambs, devour them wholes,

save the in the zoo garden ark of your belly.'

(Pg.47, Second Sight)

Lord of lion is Narsimbha, boar snout is Varaha, fish's eyes refer to Matsya are incarnations of almighty to save earth and mankind. These are various folds of same thought that God and Goddess are inseparable part of Indian sensibilities. Most Indian scriptures, with reference like- Kalpvriksha and Chatyavriksha, indicate that tree worship is an integral part of Indian culture. Ramanujan in his celebrated poem "Ecology" reflects a similar ideology where his

mother prohibits him from cutting a tree. She gives numerous reasons to save the tree from the rage of her son. She states that the dropping of seeds by birds is a good omen which is actually a trope found in the Upanishad. Worship and reverence of nature are often mentioned in his poetry, the festival of Nagpanchami in his poem "Snakes", symbolizes the significance of serpents in India as an ornament of Lord Shiva. This poem points out the truth of insensibility and indifference of the modern society. Snake-charmers are poor who do not hesitate to risk their lives to take care of their starving families. The shelf arranged in geometrical pattern reminds him of snake in foreign land, when a man brought a bag full of cobras to his house and people from neighborhood came to see them curving on the floors. The market scene is seen as an important part of traditional milieu, spiritually significant because of its message of cyclical nature of life that is becoming fruit from a seed.

'Mother gives them milk

In saucer.'(Pg. 229, Snakes, Collected Poems)

These lines emphatically reveal the staunch believe that Indian carry mutual independencies of body, culture and sensibilities. Viewing the conventional with an unconventional perspective is his forte. Chromosome of his mathematician father gifted him the logical intent to analyze things in a different manner, be it Indian culture or its approaches. His voice is that of an outsider who could comprehend tenets from an unbiased stand.

His poem "The Striders" opens a scope for a deconstructive analysis in relation to the poets with Indian sensibilities. It is a poem of perspective; the insect is treated as a subject of analytical study and the first stanza is the source of ideas, describing the physical attributes of the insect. It is exploration of thought in tangible world where the poet refers to human ideas perching on 'Capillary-legs', the poet must be referring to the force of globalization through the 'ripple skin of a stream'. The stream is a common image of continuity and time change in Indian Philosophy. The poet links the ancient and the modern by bringing into light, the depth and potentiality of ancient prophets who could walk on water without being sunk representing the power of human being who sits on a landslide of light means his is capable to going deep into the mystery of light or Universe. Ironical in tone, moral strength of human being is degraded. Yoga and Yogic power is an inseparable part of Indian tradition which is now a declined power. The water insect is also symbolic of adventurous attitude of humans and ethnic assimilation of people from various groups. The mask of Indian sensibility is shown through memoirs, experiences, myths, legendst overlook the discrepancies prevalent in and various

other techniques.

“The Striders” locates events from his past in India, while he is in abroad, and explicitly states Indian sensibilities as a Diaspora. He is a poet with oriental vision and occidental mind. Indian is a country of saints and prophets; there grandeur is compared to that of a bug that’s equally capable of sitting of the rays of lights. His satire on Indian gurus in another poem “The Guru”:

‘Give the dog his bone, the parrot
His seed, the pet snake his mouse
But do not give woman her freedom
Nor man his midday meal till he begs.’
(Pg. 251, The Guru ,Collected Poems)

There is a fusion of native culturalism and detached outlook of the western thought in his poetry. S.K. Desai says that Ramanujan “is not just that of the Hindu or merely an Indian in the sense that he sees only those. His perspective eyes rover wider and the limit of his perception is encompassing a wider area.”

He is extremely inspired by Indian text and scriptures. To cite his words: “Thus a text like the Mahabharata is not a text but a tradition.” His inclination towards exploration of Indian sensibility originates from the religious thoughts and the native customs and rites and rituals. His mythological poems entitled Mythologies I,II,III echo the holy book of Hindus ‘Shrimadbhagavadgita’, as Lord Krishna preach Arjuna these words:
Paritranaya sadhunam

Vinasaya cha duskritam
Dharama-samthapanarthara
Sambhavami yuge yuge.
(Pg. 8, Shrimadbhagavadgita.)

Ramanujan’s poetry is exploring sensibilities to give it a fresh dimension. Indian perspective and experience towards human problem, finds a prominent place in his poetry. Usage of image depicts the human situations, complexities and contradiction experienced by people. Ramanujan has pointed out few poets do not sympathize towards human suffering. In the poem “A River” he showcased loss and destruction caused by the flood. The huts are ruined and people living on the banks have to undergo a lot of disturbances. Modern Madurai is now unromantic and subjected to destruction, as a result of modern civilization. Rain comes and there is flood in the river are the frequent imagery of Sangam literature. River is only a trickle now, Watergates are clogged by women’s hair and straws. The patches of repair on the bridge show the intricacies of images showing the present state of city that used to be the main object of ale and praise. He censure those who are not willing to share the suffering of others. There is a sharp contrast between the old and the new where the human conscience was absent

in the glorious songs of the past. The pregnant woman with twins in her womb was surely not the concern of old poets. Thus, he is an unbiased lover of Indian culture and scenario in terms of realistic portrayal is concerned. Though he is deprived of Indianess in America, he is away from his motherland but this does not restrain him from presenting an equally critical picture of present Madurai.

He says that:

‘The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of pregnant women
drowned , with perhaps twins in her
kicking at blank wall
even before birth.’ (Pg. 39, A River, Selected

Poems)

His poem “Small Scale reflection on a Great house” reduces grandeur of cultural heritage in an ironic tone. What leaves always returns but now from the wrong address which signifies that past is less a source of value and pride, than simply a collection of chaotic times.

“wedding anniversary of some God” signifies diversity of festivals and plurality of religion, “jackfruit” a vegetable of Indian origin got a mention in his poetry clearly denotes that his tropes are completely Indian in every sense. S.S. Dulai states about Ramanujan who made a multicultural commitment and transcended the limitation of an expatriate poet, in the following words:

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 self and his Indian experience, his poetry executes circles comprehending ever-wider realities, yet maintaining a perfect taut connection between its constant and continuously evolving central vision and the expanding scene before it.

Whether it’s the delay of Indian telegraphic services, or the dead bodies of the relatives in the military services returning to the house from the significant places of the world’s attention by long, the tension at the national boundaries frame the outlook for sensibilities concerning various things: “Even before the telegrams reached/on a perfectly good/chatty afternoon” (Selected poems)

The example of the Great house is juxtaposed against Yeats’ theme of great house as monuments of society’s history and culture. Owing to poverty and proper amenities, disease once entered the household continued to haunt the scenario appearing as if there was no permanent cure to it. Widespread superstitions causing congenital deformity and disease is another

crucial element concerning sensibility. "Love poem for a wife-I" is often cited to show that Ramanujan is a part of Indian Brahmin culture. Restoration of relations and childhood is a constant desire in his writings. Though he is unaware of the fact that his spontaneous flow of thoughts about his childhood memories are resulting in a picture of Indian life and culture on the canvas of poetry. Matching of horoscope, betrothed before birth and non compatible marriages are common phenomenon in Indian culture and inevitable as far as sensibilities are in question. This poem shows the mature aspect of love with sacrifice and compromising approach. He thinks of his position like that of a god Natrajan, balancing the stillness in the dynamic dance metaphorical of the marital life. This is surely not a usual love poem but an informal one where the poet is not directly proclaiming his love which is again Indian in every sense.

'Betroth us before birth,

Forestalling separate horoscope' (Pg. 83, Love poem for a wife, Selected poems)

These lines depict Indian tendency for marriage and personal relations. There are instances where we see scenic beauty of India and its rich and varied heritage. The locale scene gives a clear picture of day to day life of Indian folk. The description of cows, rivers, temples, marriages, libraries, households make his poetry an open letter to read and know India and its people. He puts finger on the nerve when he showcases the environment of India as a place to dwell and survive. The mentioning of natural disaster and its consequences, the superstitions governing the activities of people, the relaxing and unprogressive attitude of socio-political machinery gives idea of the other side of coin. This quality of dealing with subjects which such intellectuality is bestowed only to Ramanujan. Such came be found in his following lines:

'Lame wandering cows from nowhere have been known to be tethered, given a name, encouraged to get pregnant in the broad daylight of the street under the elder's supervision, the girls hiding behind windows with holes in them.' (Pg. 71, Relations)

Ramanujan is a poet who uses Indian culture, history, mythology to deal with themes similar to western poets. His poetry is "rooted in and stems from the Indian environment and reflects its mores, often ironically." His vision towards Indian sensibility is singular in every sense, as it has enabled him to go to India's past. The past comes to life in his poetry, and this 'presence of past' might have lost if he lived entirely in India. It is his peculiarity that his views on Indian life and culture are output of complex configurations. He is the eastern in western climate with unchanged approach for his country and culture. His speciality takes us to the fact that he wishes to regain the 'First

Sight':

'As we enter the dark,
Someone says from behind,
You are Hindoo, aren't you?

ou must have second sight.' (Pg. 191, Second Sight, Collected Poems)

Ramanujan's authenticity regarding his creation is a result of the understanding and response to native tradition and ethos. His poems are answer to the charges laid down by critics that Indian poetry in little Indian in content. Thus, he tries to find roots in native ethos and adopt a rational vision of western with the glorious history and spiritual richness of east. Bhagat Nayak rightly says:

Ramanujan as the Indian Ezra Pound for his, making India relevant abroad. He is next Tagore to convince the Western Intelligentsia that Indian tradition is not a single street or a one way street but consists of many connected streets and neighborhoods. As W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney express their concern for Ireland, and Black American poets like Ben Okri for Africa, Ramanujan express his deep concern for India and Hinduism in which he is firmly rooted.

India is an impact on him; it is not where he wishes to return as his tone is ironic and the past return in the form of fear, anxieties and psychological effects. His sensibility is closely associated to images. "Small town South India" presents a specimen of temple streets in Madras with characteristic Indian detail of domestic animals and temple employees. In the poem like "Looking and Finding" Ramanujan speaks of national unity and diversity:

Having no clear conscience,
he looks for one in the morning news
Assam then, Punjab now, finds him guilty
of an early breakfast of two whole

poached eggs. (Pg. 179, Looking and Finding, Collected Poems)

"A Hindu to his body" is another important poem that presents a detailed image of Indian life and culture. The Indian sensibility is well expressed in the gesture forecasting the harmless attitude of people residing here in a different tone which is deep rooted contempt at the apparent notion of detachment. His poem is a self mockery on the double standard of thinking and its execution. This shows the firm grip over his analytical mind and obvious loopholes in the religious practices. Beneath the satire lies the cry of despair at the decline of moral and ethical values. He does not seem to be alienated from his religious background in America, whereas he is deeply pained at the derogatory state of Hinduism. He cannot sever his ties from his religion, while on the other hand,

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he just not overlook the discrepancies prevalent in contemporary Hinduism. The poet says in one of his religious verse that he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either ironically states the kind of gentleness the Hindus possess:

Its 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. (Pg. 62, On the Hindoo, Collected Poems)
Poem "Obituary" is a:

Hindu way of connecting with eternity, the soul with god after it leaves the body. Ramanujan not only explores the Indian life rhythm through this Hindu ritual but seems to quite aware of the secular world that Hindus inhabit.

This poem shows the ritualistic and realistic aspects of death in an Indian Hindu family. Written in first person narrative, the eldest son is mourning at the demise of his father but quite disgruntled by the bills unpaid and unmarried daughters of his father. When the father was cremated, coins were placed on the body's eyes. In Hindu custom, the body is cremated within twenty-four hours and hot coals are thrown in an eastward direction. His father's obituary took two lines in a local newspaper, four weeks after his cremation. The son says that he looks for the paper for fun, and then he says he would like to have the obituary. The father-son relationship is colored in a special bond and social stature, son has respect for his father but burdened by the responsibilities to run the house in his absence. This bond and situation is typical Indian in context and tradition.

His ironical attitude treating Indian sensibilities gets its height in "Prayer to Lord Murugan". This is a poem of counter-cultural sensibilities and poet's quest for human touch in life. He laments over the present manners of prayer and modern man's irresponsible withdrawal from the spiritual center. He uses the prayer motif to inscribe the self and shed subjective identity. Addressed as the Lord of the last-born, Lord of the lost traveler, Lord of answers the almighty is used to a tool to clarify the ignorance of perception of Indian tradition in an ironical posture. The poet wishes to be brought back to the desired mode of life so that one could discriminate from false notion and scientific truth. Extract from this poem is as follows:

'Lord of the twelve right hands
why are we your mirror men
with the two left hands
capable only of casting reflections?
Lord of faces,
we lost early
this morning.'

(Pg. 3, Prayer to Lord Murugan, Selected Poems)

In his essay 'Classics Lost and Found' Ramanujan refers to the origin of above stated poem: My poem, too, talks about some Indian attitudes to the Indian past, with which I was

somewhat despondently preoccupied at the time. I had felt that Sanskrit itself and all that is represented had become an absence, at best a crippling and not an enabling presence, that the future needed a new past. Many things have changed since then and so have I. But the mood, the relation to what a God Murugan means, is a real one, and I hope it speaks not only for me. (Pg. 140, Classics Lost and Found)

Ramanujan's poetry is a remarkable blend of emotion and reason, head and heart. He is a victim of cultural ambivalence and personal dilemma but he is an invaluable asset to Indian English poetry. Being a distinguished poet, his poetry comes largely on his family and relations, on his Indian association, mesmerizing lineage and sensibilities. Despite his death in 1993, he will always be recognized as a technical artist with perfect balance of tradition and modern. His observations for Indian life and culture are unparalleled. His poetry has modern themes rooted in Indian cultural traditions. His continuity is that of T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and Individual talent' which says that every new text added to a tradition will both alter and confirm that tradition. One should have a wonderful ear to enjoy the internal rhythm of his poetic construction which is termed as Architectonic by Mathew Arnold. Others sang, few spoke but Ramanujan has an ability to both speak and sing the inner thought with rhythmic beauty and social relevance.

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