

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

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Attippat Krishnaswami Ramanujan, a linguist, an anthropologist, a translator (from and to Tamil, Kannada and English) and above all a 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. His sensibilities reject spirituality and abstract systems, and views personal experiences through intellectual, philosophical and psychological prisms. 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 his 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.

(King 11).

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.

(Pandey 5).

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.'*

(Collected Poems)

Lord of lion is Narsimbha, boar snout is Varaha, fish 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:

*'Mother gives them milk
In saucers.'*

(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.

Many of his poetic creations, including his famous collection of poems like The striders (1966), Relations (1971), Selected poems (1976), The Second Sight, The Black Hen and other, apart from his translated poems, bear the mask of Indian sensibility through memoirs, experiences, myths, legends as various techniques.

*The Striders
And serach
For certain thin-
Stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs.
See them perch*

*On dry capillary legs
Weightless
On the ripple skin
Of a stream
Not only prophets
Walk in water. The bug sits
On a landslide of lights
And drowns eye-
Deep
Into its tiny strip
Of sky.'*

(Collected Poems)

This is his best collection of poems, 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 who's equally capable of sitting of the rays of lights. His satire on Indian gurus in his 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.'*

(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.' (Pandey 146)

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.' (Sharma 420). 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 1,2,3 echo the holy book of Hindus 'Shrimadbhagavadgita', as Lord Krishna preach Arjuna these words:

*Paritranaya sadhunam
Vinasaya cha duskritam
Dharama-samthapanarthara
Sambhavami yuge yuge.*

(Shrimadbhagavadgita , 8)

Ramanujan's poerty 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. He censure those who are not willing to share the suffering of others.

He says that:

*'The new poets still iQuoted
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.'*

(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.*

(Dulai 151).

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 iQuestion. Lines from his poem 'Love poem for a wife':

*'Betroth us before birth,
Forestalling separate horoscope'*

(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 iQuality 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.'*

(Relations 71)

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.' (Parthasarathy 3). 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 specialty 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?
You must have second sight.'*

(Collected Poems 191).

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.

(Nayak 1).

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.*

(Collected poems 179).

'A Hindu to his body' is another important poem that presents a detailed image of Indian life and culture. It emphasizes the significance of the body to a Hindu who is supposed to attach greater importance to the soul. In this poem, Ramanujan seems to go against the accepted notion of body among the Hindus. The Hindus do not consider body 'dear' as stated in the following lines:

*Dear pursuing presence,
Dear body...*

(Collected Poems 40)

On the contrary to the accepted notion that the soul is permanent, changes body and the poet years for a permanent body:

*Let me go with you and feel the weight
of honey-hives in my branching,
and the burlap weave of weaver birds
in my hair.*

(Collected Poems 40).

The poem 'The Hindoo', 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.*

(Collected Poems 62).

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 iQuite aware of the secular world that Hindus inhabit.

(Mishra 12).

His ironical attitude treating Indian sensibilities gets its height in 'Prayer to Lord Murugan'. He laments over the present manners of prayer and modern man's irresponsible withdrawal from the spiritual center. 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.'*

(Selected Poems 3)

In his essay 'Classics Lost and Found'

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