

East West Tensions in the Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan.

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Abstract

A. K. Ramanujan was a bilingual, even a trilingual poet who wrote in Kannada, Tamil and English. Some of his finest work consists of translations from Tamil and Kannada into English. His essentially Indian sensibility has enabled him to go to India's past and his sense of Indian history and tradition is unique. The past comes to life in his poetry and this presence of the past might not have been possible, had he continued to live in India. His poetic output is reflected in his two slender volumes. Most of his poems have their origin in the collected personal emotions that deal with the poet's memory of his relations and ambiguous freedom that life away from them confers. His poems convey his strong sense of history. The consciousness of the tragedy of India and of being an Indian—the ancient chaos of a country—comes through clearly in his poems. The linking of the familiar experience with the historical consciousness is a feature which runs through his poetry, from early poems to the last poems. The presence of the past is unique feature in his poems. Ramanujan's significance lies in his success and yet unobtrusive fusion of an essential Indian sensibility with an acutely felt temper of modernity. From his artistic detachment results the ironic stance which gives artistic validity to his poetry. The poet's irony is all pervasive. Most of the poems about his family are tinged with irony. "Obituary", "Still Life", "Self-Portrait", "Love Poems for a Wife I and II", "Prayer to Lord Murugan", "A River" are some of the poems that reflect his Indian sensibility.

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A.K. Ramanujan, like most other Indian poets writing in English, is a bi-lingual poet. He writes both in Kannada and in English and some of his finest work consists of translations from Tamil and Kannada into English.

Ramanujan was a bilingual even a trilingual poet, for he also wrote both in Kannada and in Tamil. He was a genuine poet who had something worthwhile to say and he knew how to say it both in English and in his native tongue. The secret of its success lies in his not disowning his Indian inheritance and not falling prey to a feeling of alienation, despite his long sojourn abroad. His poetry has an unmistakable authenticity of tone and treatment.

Born in India and had resided in USA, he was the professor of Dravidian Studies and Linguistics at the University of Chicago, U.S.A. He was a voluntary exile from India. He had cut himself off and from his immediate native environment, but this had been a gain and not a loss. His essentially Indian sensibility had enabled him to go to India's past and his sense of Indian history and tradition was unique. The past comes to life in his poetry and this presence of the past might not have been possible had he continued to live in India.

Ramanujan's poetic output in English consists of two slender volumes: 1) **The Striders** and 2) **Relations: Poems**. The poems of these volumes clearly bring out that Ramanujan summons from the hinterland of memory buried moments of suspense, surprise or agony and turn them into disturbingly vivid poems. The mutilated images are like the images which are unforgettable. **Relations: Poems** is an ever maturer achievement, a kind of bridge spanning childhood and old age, and India and America. Most of the poems in these volumes have their origin in the collected personal emotions that deal with the poet's memory of his relations and the ambiguous freedom that life away from them confers. These poems convey his strong sense of history. The consciousness of the tragedy of India and of being an Indian—the ancient chaos of a country—comes through clearly in his poems.

Ramanujan's historical sensibility is sharp and acute. His awareness of history which is hinted at his first volume of poems **The Striders** gets powerfully projected in several of the so-called family poems in **Relations**. The consciousness of the tragedy of India, and of being an Indian—the ancient chaos of the country comes through clearly in poems like **Compensation** and **The Last of the Princes**.

The linking of the familiar experience with the historical consciousness is a feature which runs through the poetry of Ramanujan from early poems to the last poem. Ramanujan, with his tragic vision is able to evoke the recurring patterns of historical tragedy and individual suffering and turns to use the phrase used by Theodore Spencer, "the poetry of reverie into the poetry of immediacy" (Spencer-1931) and to establish a pattern of permanence in the flux of individual experience.

He sees in the anxiety of the individual the anxiety of a people long subjected to misery and thralldom, an anxiety that can find no metaphor to end it. The strong nostalgic note which is such a prominent feature of much of Ramanujan's poetry, does not portray the nostalgia of an individual for times and things past. It is rather the collective nostalgia of a whole people who look back, often in an attitude of love- hate, to the past, at once drawn towards and repelled by it.

The presence of the past is unique feature in the poems of Ramanujan. However, India and America, the two opposites exist separately in them and it is only rarely that he is able to reconcile the two. They come together only in such a perfect poems as **Still Another View of Grace**. However we cannot agree with Nagaraja's assessment, who, in his introduction to Ramanujan's poetry in **The Quest**, special number (1972) "suggests that the promise of the first book has not been fulfilled in the second. If, at all, one were to find fault with Ramanujan, it would be for the thinness of his output. This slenderness may be attributed to his fastidiousness and his meticulous attention to the aesthetic aspects of his work. He is a consumer artist who tries to achieve perfection before publishing a work".

Paul Varghese says, "Ramanujan's poetry expresses an Indian sensibility sharpened and conditioned by western education" (Verghese-1971). Ramanujan himself has described the factors that contributed to the forming of his sensibility: "English and my disciplines (linguistics Anthropology) give me my outer forms- linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of sharpening experiences; and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trip, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my inner forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other and I no longer can tell what comes from where." (Ramanujan -1974) It means that Ramanujan's significance lies in his success and yet unobtrusive fusion of an essential Indian sensibility with an acutely felt temper of modernity. This interpretation of the East and West is most clearly seen in poems like **Prayers to Lord Murugan**. The poet has learned to stand at a distance or across a culture and look at things Indian with amused detachment. This traditional-modern or Indian-Western conflict or active engagement imparts the requisite dynamic force or tension to his poetry and raises it to the level of highest art.

From this artistic detachment also results the ironic stance which gives artistic validity to Ramanujan's poetry. His eyes do take on a Merry twinkle as he surveys the Indian scene from across the Atlantic, as do those of the grown-ups when they fall upon their children at play. Even things considered most sacred receive an ironic, bemused treatment. For example, in **Obituary** an average and family day to day transaction at the Provision Store is dramatized and imbued with cosmic possibilities for reasons which remain somewhat mysterious to an Indian reader. The poet's irony is all-pervasive. Most of the poems about his family are tinged with irony. **Still Life** captures this irony at its most static:

When she left me
after lunch, I read
for a while.
But I suddenly wanted
to look against
and I saw the half eaten
sandwich
bread
lettuce and salami
all carrying the shape
of her bite.

Irony is dominated by good humour in Self-Portrait:

I resemble every one
but my self, and some times see
in shop- windows
despite the well known laws of optics,
the portrait of a stranger, date unknown
often singed in a corner by my father.

The confessional note in the poems about close relations, mother, father, grandfather, wife and children gains it's aesthetic validity from this ironic stance. **Love Poems for a Wife :I and II** are elaborate studies in this vein.

History juxtaposes scenes from the past revealing the pieces of skeleton in the cupboard:

When the great aunt died, her two
daughters, one dark one fair,
unknown each to the other
alternately picked their mother's body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut
of diamond ear-rings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair,
the toe rings from her wedding.

The poet's self is the theatre in which are staged a host of incidents from the past and across which move a number of personae like his grandparents, mother, father, cousins, wife. In **Small Scale Reflections on a Great House**, is staged the history of the great family house, and we witness the comedy of a number of strange and bizarre personae coming to the house never to go back or to return to it soon, even if they by chance happen to go out. In the last stanza humour mingles with pathos as is staged the drama of the return of the nephew who went out of the Great House, won laurels in the war and then returned to it as a Corpse on a particularly 'chatty evening'. **Love Poem For a Wife I** stages a powerful psychic drama through a "you and I" conflict.

There is a crisscross of memories which adequately conveys the intensity of the poet's yearning for emotional fulfilment in the family relationships. In this way the family figures and objects associated with his childhood become the signs and symbols - the alphabets for conveying the poet's emotions.

As Ramanujan himself has said, "the authentic voice of the poet, his true language, does not solely depend upon the tongue in which he uses to express himself, the landscapes, the personae, the appropriate modes, all become a language within language". (Ramanujan-1974). Like a native speaker, he makes Infinite use of finite means, to say with familiar words what has never been said before; he can say exactly what he wants to without even being aware of the ground rules of his grammar. It is perhaps an unconscious awareness of this quality that is responsible for the virtues.

Family is one of the central metaphors in Ramanujan's poetry, but the family itself is viewed in its historical context. Ramanujan living in the USA for the last over fifteen years looks across an alien culture and a vast ocean, to find his roots in Indian myth and tradition. That is why his separation from his immediate Indian environment has been a blessing. In his case apparent alienation from the immediate environment has meant continuity with an older ideal, that is, with Indian historical tradition. There is always the presence of the past in his poetry; he is not of those who hope for future without organically remembering the past, who are guilty of the folly, of trying to build history out of an unhistorical present. His personal and family conflicts and frustrations are constantly related to the Indian intellectual and social environment, both present and past. In this way the individual and particular is generalised and universalized and his poetry ceases to be the anthropological oddity of the unthinking scoffers.

From personal experience the poet constantly passes on to a depiction of shared or collective experience. He seeks comfort in a communal past, he constantly goes back to India's common heritage of myth and tradition. The pathos of life of the educated Indian today, torn by opposing pulls and conflicts acquires a tragic dimension as it is viewed against India's tragic past and her equally tragic present. He is acutely alive to the decadent social milieu of contemporary India. His poetry reflects the predicament of one who while intellectually convinced of the need for relating himself to history through tradition is exposed to a milieu-the contemporary Indian one.

This is clearly reflected in the poem **Prayer to Lord Murugan**;

"We eat legends and leavings
remember the Ivory, the apes,
the peacocks we sent in the Bible
to Solomon, the medicines for smallpox,
the similes
for Muslim; wavering snake skins,
a cloud of steam.
Ever rehearsing astronauts
we purify and return
our urine
to the circling body
and burn our faces
for fuel to reach the moon
through the sky behind

the navel."

Still the poet is determined to seek his identity in India's past, "I must seek and will find my particular hell only, in my Hindu mind," (Ramanujan----) the immediate consequence of this is to discover that the native conventions can be meaningful not in the immediate present but only in the literary past which at best is available only in the act of translation, not of creation.

Concrete, visual imagery is central to Ramanujan's technique of communication. More often than not, it works and it does convey his essentially Indian sensibility. It is drawn from the common Indian scenes and sights so vividly present before the mind's eye of the poet. In **A River**, for example, he depicts a common, everyday phenomenon of Indian life- the suffering caused to the people by the ever recurring floods and draughts;

every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straws and the women's hair
clogging the Watergate
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them,
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-cooled buffaloes longing in the sun.

The concreteness and precision is achieved by the use of telling vivid and visual imagery. Ramanujan's poetry is image oriented. In his poetry the image is not only the spring board of poetic composition but the kernel as well. Underneath the poems one can decipher the pattern in which the poet seems to think -the pattern of images. Thus, his basic means of expression is subliminal, and it lies below the threshold of language. His images are primarily visual. Words tend to collocate together into an image which then triggers off the poem. The entire poem is, in fact, one image or a complex of more than one images as in the following from **No Man Is Island**:

The entire Island:
an alligator
sleeping in mask of stone.
A grin of land
even on good days; on bad,
the ocean foams in that mouth.

He prefers the concrete and the precise as against the general, the vague and the abstract. This is apparent even in the title of his poems. **The Students, Snakes, Breaded Fish, A River, A Poem on Particulars, An Image for Politics**. He has an eye for the particular physiognomy of the connect and an insight into its characteristic qualities. His image carries within itself the precise figure of the object with a vivid sense of its distinctive quality. The Striders-a kind of New England (USA) waterbugs -are described:

Thin -stemmed, bubbled -eyed waterbugs
see them perch on dry capillary legs
Weightless on the ripple skin of a strife.

Another poem **The Snakes** conveys the childhood memory of snakes having been revived, the poet singles out a particular experience of fright as a child seeing ritual cobras with their brown wheat glisten ringed with ripples, licking the room with their bodies. The childhood experience establishes a new system of relationship for the child between the external world and imagination-a connection between a thing and what it suggests to the child's imagination. The poem is a successful rendering of the memory of a childhood experience.

To conclude Ramanujan's achievement, his work bears the impress of all great poetry- turning the ephemeral into the permanent, articulating the predicament of a whole people in verse which at one and the same time, is charged with emotion and has the detachment of great art.

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