

Modernist Life and Culture in A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry

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Abstract - Ramanujan's command over English idiom and languages and his grasp over the essence of Indian wisdom and world-view have been acknowledged by his contemporaries. He has brought out his outlook towards life in the poem. Ramanujan has traced it to the ancient myths through apt images and irony. Ramanujan's poetry brings out the prominent characteristics of not only the Indian poetry in English, but also the modernist poetry. Ramanujan's contribution in the development of Indian poetry in English is substantial, and reflects the basic aspects of Indian social life.

keywords - Indian society, Indian Politics, life and culture, human sentiments

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English Poetry is not just a branch of Indian literature in English. It is now an essential part of Indian- English literature. In fact, it primarily defines Indo-Anglican literature in the sense that in its birth, Indian-writing in English came to the fore with a global recognition. Like American poetry, Indian English poetry is highly distinctive in various aspects. It is not a product that sprang into being in a span of a few years or a few decades. It is a well furnished product, thoroughly polished from its raw state into its present having undergone an evolution for more than a century since its inception in the early nineteenth century. Indian English poetry has distinctive position in world literature. Initially, being Indian poets in English was a difference. The variance was on the basis of content and skills levels, background, experiences, themes etc.

Ramanujan's poetry is a depiction of human sentiments, feelings and emotions in a direct way without any gloss or sophistication. There are no traces of alien influences on his poetry, in spite of his long stay abroad. His poetry has technical excellence and bears the stamp of his individuality. In the poem 'Entries for a Catalogue of Fears' he says, "I will grow/charitable one day/begin to classify/at dawn the week's bread crumbs / in a plastic bag for the red and black/street ant/the beggar doves in the park/the free sapphire blue jay/in the tree/will make a habit/of the shelled peanut/in my hand."

Ramanujan's poems have a technical perfection which is exemplary. His poetry is never pedantic or verbose and is written in a language which is crisp, intense and casual. In his poem 'The Striders' in order to draw the attention of the reader he has introduced even ambiguity "And search/for certain thin/stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs/Sea them perch/on dry capillary legs/weightless/on the ripple skin /of a stream/No, not only prophets /walk on water. This bug sits/ on a landslide of lights/and drowns eye/deep/into its tiny strip/of sky."2

The poems of Ramanujan are finely crafted pieces, and the words shine with depth of meaning 3. The words create a rhythm and form which enhance the value of his poetry. Ramanujan has laid equal stress on the meaning, as well as the design of each poem. The designer poems of Ramanujan are not only a treat to the eye, but also indicate a multi-layered meaning. To identify the central theme of Ramanujan's poems one has to proceed cautiously with patience and imagination.4

Ramanujan's poetry has brought many laurels to him. The volumes of his poetry *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971) and *Selected Poems* (1976) have been praised by the literary critics, for the succinct expression and originality. Ramanujan has done a yeoman service by translating the Tamil and Kannada classical poetry into English5. Those who read contemporary English poetry are familiar with the nuances and death of Ramanujan's poetry. His stress on the web of family life, and the integration of the individual with it remains the prominent characteristic of his poetry.

The collection of poems in *Relations* reflect his poetic insight tinged by eastern and western cultures. He says that with the passage of time, the individual is prone to see the law of Karma in all changes around him. Ramanujan's use of irony is most evident in the poem 'Entries for a Catalogue of Fears'. Even at the advanced age of sixty instead of having total faith in God, one may "talk now and then of God", and one may find the effect of Karma "in the fall of a tubercular sparrow, and in the news paper deaths in Burma". He says in the same poem that double vision is confusing with no clarity of things in the external world, but "with one small adjustment/of glasses/all the misunderstanding vanishes".6 The mystification of events due to lack of scientific approach and empirical analysis, produce a host of problems which are hurdles in the path of progress maintains Ramanujan.

The poetry of Ramanujan is like a mirror in which one can see the face of Indian tradition, along with a host of other things. His poetry recognize the vitality inherent in Indian culture and tradition, and also the changes which have taken place in the structure of Indian society. Ramanujan's subtle irony colours his glimpses into the traditional ideas and rituals, which are followed by people belonging to different strata of Indian society. His poetry has presented the diverse aspects of tradition in a new garb, which is also indicative of the need to distinguish between the relevant and irrelevant aspects of it in the context of changes in the contemporary world.

Ramanujan's poem 'Self-Portrait' shows his excellent grasp over the use of images, to depict the experiences and emotions in his poetry. He has brought out his innermost feelings and the assessment of his own personality and its different facts in it. He says "I resemble everyone/but myself, and sometimes see/in shopwindows/ despite the well-known laws/of optics, /the portrait of a stranger,/date unknown/often signed in a corner/by my father".⁸

Ramanujan's two collections of poetry *The Striders* and *Relations* have a unique place in the corpus of Indian poetry in English. The interest and deep attachment of Ramanujan to the past events as well as history is depicted in *The Striders* and *Relations*. The poems in these two works provide an outline of his approach toward people, and the predicament faced by them in the past, and also in the world of today. He recaptures the past events very lucidly. He describes the events of his early years spent with his father, mother and grandparents.⁹ In several poems he has mentioned his role in the family and analysed his inner feelings and sentiments. For Ramanujan the past is not an amorphous entity, but is substantial to correlate with the tempo of life in the current world. He says that without knowing the linkages with the past, one cannot grasp the reality of the living present. While asserting the importance of following the norms of the contemporary world, Ramanujan likes to derive solace from the traditions and beliefs of the ancient world. He says, "I should smile, dryeyed/ and nurse martinis like the Marginal Man./ But, sorry. I cannot unlearn/Conventions of despair./ They have their pride./ I must seek and will find/my particular hell only in my hindu mind:/must translate and turn/till I blister and roast."¹⁰

Ramanujan's poetry reflects his deep insight into the cultural patterns, of both east and west. The ancient wisdom of Indian gains a new relevance in the poetry of Ramanujan, amidst the conflicts in the present world. He has analysed the human situation, through the combined vision of the east and west. The Indian perspective and experience towards the human problems, finds a prominent place in the poetry of Ramanujan. It is through appropriate images, that he has depicted the human situation, contradictions and complexities experienced by the people. His poetry is a synthesis of the best literary traditions of the Indian and the Western world. The combination of the Indian and western elements has added a new sheen to his poetry. His focus is on the several unexplored areas of human life, which are generally neglected today. His poetry concentrates on the innermost sentiments of the people, both in the Indian and western societies.

Ramanujan has pointed out that some poets have no sympathy towards the suffering of fellow beings. In the poem 'A River' he has indicated how during the flood period the river becomes an instrument of destruction. The huts are washed away and people living on river banks have to face acute suffering.¹¹ He has no respect for persons who are not inclined to share the suffering of others in their hour of crisis. He says that "The new poets still quoted/the old poets, but no one spoke/in verse/of the pregnant women/drowned, with perhaps twins in her, / kicking at blank walls/even before birth."¹²

Ramanujan is a keen observer of socio-political events, and has exposed the rapacious dealings of politicians. In his poem 'An Image for Politics' he says "Once, I'd only heard/of a Chinese fancy-dish/of fish/that rots/till it comes alive/and a maggot-spaghetti squirms/where once a mackerel gasped for worms:/cannibal/devouring smaller cannibal/till only two equal/giants are left to struggle,/entwined,/like wrestlers on a cliff:/and at last / only one/omnipotent/maggot-cesar who rent/his rivals/and lived/of all the mob and the triumvirate/his fat and lonely body stiff/and blind with meat."¹³ The images of cannibals and squirming worms, bring out the strategy of some politicians who have no qualms in removing the rivals from their path, and playing their nefarious games without any sympathy for the welfare of the masses. Ramanujan has protested against the monopolists and dictators, who have no respect for human values. He prefers to follow the values embedded in the Hindu world-view. He is against accepting the socio-political systems, which negate the human values enshrined in the civilizations of the world.¹⁴ Ramanujan seeks the blessings of Lord Murugan, to sharpen his sensibilities and deeper love towards fellow human beings in his poem 'Prayers to Lord Murugan'. He says, "Lord of the sixth sense/give us Back /our five senses".¹⁵ Lord Murugan is regarded as the God bestowing both plenty and fertility, in the Dravidian religious tradition. There is similarity in the basic religious outlook and themes, between the Dravidian and Hindu traditions with overlapping modes of worship and ritual. Murugan is the God with six faces and twelve hands.

Ramanujan has described the attributes of Lord Murugan in the following verses. "Unlike other gods/you found work/for every face,/and made /eyes at only one/Woman. And your arms / are like faces with proper/names."¹⁶ That humanity is one family remains an important tenet of Hinduism. Ramanujan is fascinated by the ideals of Hinduism and has presented the manifold facets of it. He has acknowledged that, some traditions in it have outlived their utility, and now they have only a sentimental value. He has mixed humour and irony while presenting the tragic death of the family member in a far corner of the world. In the poem 'Small scale Reflections on a Great House' he says, "Once in nineteen forty three/from as far away as the Sahara,/half-gnawed by desert foxes/and lately from somewhere/in the north, a nephew with stripes/on his shoulder was called/an incident on the border/ and was brought back in plane/and train and military truck/even before the telegrams reached,/on a perfectly good/chatty afternoon."¹⁷

Ramanujan's two volumes of poetry *The Striders* as well as *Relations* deals with the events which happened in his family. He describes how different members of the family had to face situations which effected them deeply.¹⁸ Ramanujan has given basic significance to things, events and memories connected with the family. The family grows, new entrants swell the reservoir of memorabilia with the passage of time. He finds in the family history the cultural patterns and traditions. He depicts the characteristics of the hindu family and society, which have survived many a cataclysm by sheer unity and grit. Ramanujan says, "Sometimes I think that nothing/that ever comes into this house/goes out. Things come in everyday/to lose themselves among other things/lost long ago among/other things lost long ago;"¹⁹

Ramanujan has adopted an objective outlook while describing the members of his family. His sympathy and empathy towards the family members is not devoid of the tinge of irony. He has dealt with the history and genealogy of the family, and also with the incoming and the outgoing members in the following lines. "Nothing stays out: daughters/get married to short-live idiots;/sons who run away come back/in grandchildren who recite Sanskrit/to approving old men, or bring/betel nuts for visiting uncles."²⁰

The characteristics of Indian family are reflected in the poetry of Ramanujan along with diverse themes. The intricate relationships within the family organization have been conveyed by Ramanujan in his poetry. He has pointed out that, within the family the individual gains protection, stability and strength, otherwise he would have been “like a hunted deer/on the wide white/Salt land” says Ramanujan in the epigraph to the Relations, which is a translation from old Tamil poetry.

The different facets of life in a close-knit family have been described by Ramanujan. In the poem ‘Of Mothers among other things’ he has dealt with the changes in the life of his mother. The deterioration in his mother’s health with the passage of time, leaves her a shadow of her former self. Ramanujan says that now “her hands are a wet eagle’s two black pink-crinkled feet,/one talon crippled in a garden/trap set for a mouse”²¹

Ramanujan has brought out the pathos in his mother’s life, who could never escape the tedium of household work, even during failing health. The poet is grief struck at the plight of his mother, and fumbles for words as his “cold parchment tongue licks bark/in the mouth.”²²

Ramanujan is not baffled by the cultural contradictions between east and west. He has dispassionately analysed the cultural issues and has compared the different aspects of Indian culture and values with the fast changing western value patterns. He is equally at ease with themes connected with Madurai or some American city.

He has no inhibitions or fears in appreciating that which is liked by him, or to denounce that which he regards as a slur on human dignity. Ramanujan is under the influence of two traditions. He admires the western culture which encourages the talented persons, and he is a votary of the Indian way of life which affirms unity in diversity and the need to safeguard human values.

II. REFERENCES

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