

The Poetry of A.K.Ramnujan in the Light of Indianness

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A.K.Ramanujan is one of the most reputed poets of 'new' Indian English Poetry who reserves a permanent place in contemporary literature because of his multilingual talent, praiseworthy diction and longing for his country, India. His poetry presents a fine sense of nationality and nourishes Indian English literature to a large extent which paves the way to new apprentices of literature as well. His solid contribution to Indian English literature can never be forgotten and he will always be a cynosure of literature as his works deal with various themes like love, family, society, myth etc. The purpose of this paper is to observe the idea of Indianness in the poetry of A.K.Ramanujan.

Indianness is a way of life, a mode of expression and a medium of revealing the patriotic sensibility of Indian people. It is an idea which has a permanent place in the heart of Indian people. It is also an instrument by which Indians feel the glory of their culture, language, art of living, mythology, and many other things. Though many Indian writers are from the various states of India who delineate their particular localities in their works, yet the essence of their writings is Indianness. Indianness is constituted in a text by the description of culture, philosophy, scripture, place and many other things of India. In his essay entitled 'Indianness of Indian Fiction in English' from the book *Studies of Contemporary Indian Fiction in English* edited by Prof. A.N.Dwivedi, Prof. Sheo Bhushan Shukla says that:

Now most of our writers in English are Indians living in India. Leaving a few, they write about particular parts of the country : Mulk Raj Anand and Khushwant Singh write about the Punjab; Bhabani Bhattacharya, Humayun Kabir, Sudhin Ghose and

Anita Desai recreate the social and intellectual milieu of Bengal, Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan , Kamala Markandaya and S.Menon Marath have chosen South India As their locale....The themes that engage these writers in their novels and short stories are also typically Indian...(75).

Attipat Krisnaswami Ramanujan was born in Mysore on March 16, 1929 in a Srivaishnava Brahmin family. He was well-versed in English, Tamil and Kannad languages. His creative works have been written in English, while Tamil and kannad have become the sources of his translations. He has also written some creative works in Kannad. His poetry collections are: *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Second Sight* (1986) and *The Black Hen* in his posthumously published *Collected Poems* 1994. Ramanujan died in Chicago, on July 13, 1993, at the age of 64, as a result of critical reaction to anesthesia during the preparation for surgery. He spent a long time in the U.S.A. and settled over there until his death, but he did not forsake his Indianness and Indian sensibility unto the last, as Prof. A.N.Dwivedi remarks in his book entitled *A.K.Ramanujan and His Poetry*, “And though he has been living in the States since long, he has not forsaken his Indian heritage and sensibility. Again and again, he reverts to the theme of the past and displays a remarkable sense of Indian history and culture” (1).

Ramanujan’s poem entitled ‘Snakes’ reminds us the occasion of *Nagpanchami*, a Hindu festival, in which people offer milk to snakes for the sake of their safety. It is also considered that snakes are very lovable to lord Shiva so Indian people adore snake to appease lord Shiva. In this poem, the poet’s mother offers milk to snakes as he writes thus:

A basketful of ritual cobras
comes into the tame little house,
Their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples.
They lick the room with their bodies curves

uncurling, writing a sibilant alphabet of panic
of my floor. Mother gives them milk
in saucers.

(Collected Poems, 4)

In the poem entitled 'A River', the poet describes about an Indian river named Vaikai which turns out to be a trickle in summer. The poets of Madurai want to describe the flood of Vaikai in their rhymes. The river carried of three village houses, a pregnant woman, a couple of cows named Gopi and Brinda, but they did not describe anything about this destruction. The new poets are still quoting the old poets, but they did not have sufficient time to mention the story of the subversion. Ultimately, Ramanujan draws our attention to this story in the concluding stanza of the poem. He writes as follows:

... the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant women...

(Collected Poems, 39)

The poem 'THE HINDOO: he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either' reminds us a shloka of *The Mahabharata* that is *ahimsa parmo dharmah* (*Adiparva*) (non violence is the ultimate duty). The poet indites thus:

It's time I told you why

I'm so gentle, do not hurt a fly.

Why, I cannot hurt a spider

either...

(Collected Poems, 62)

The impact of Buddhism is also evident in the above mentioned lines as Ramanujan holds the sufficient influence of Buddha philosophy and this philosophy is an integral part of Indian philosophy. Non-violence is also the greatest weapon of Gandhi ji, as a result of this India got freedom.

'One, Two, Maybe Three, Arguments against Suicide' is a poem which contains sufficient impact of Indian scriptures. First of all, there is a proverb in Indian mythology that is *jeevet saradah shatam* (live hundred years), hence the poet is against suicide in this poem. The third section of this poem holds a Sanskrit word 'kama' along with the name of a book entitled *Kamsutra*. The word 'Kama' stands for Kamdev who is burnt by Lord Shiva as he wanted to interrupt the meditation of Lord. Consequently, Lord Shiva became angry on him and in his wrath He burnt him alive by His third sight. *Kamsutra* is a book on the sexual behavior of human being written by Vatsyayana. The poet deals with Indian themes in this poem thus:

Desire, bodiless, is endless.

Remember what the wise callous hindus

said when the love-god burned; keep your cool,

make for love's sake no noble gesture,

All symbol, no limbs, a nobody all soul;
O Kama, only you can have no use
for the Kamasutra.

Ashes have no posture.

(Collected Poems, 72)

The poem ‘The Hindoo: he reads his GITA and is calm at all events’ reveals the poet’s sensibility of *The Geeta* in which he becomes ‘samdarshi’ (who has the same sight for everyone). The poet exhibits his concern with hindu philosophy thus:

I say nothing, I take care not to gloat.
I’ve learned to watch lovers without envy
as I’d watch in a bazaar lens
houseflies rub legs or kiss. I look at wounds calmly.

(Collected Poems, 79)

These lines have an explicit concern with the philosophy of *The Geeta* according to which we should not hate anyone as everyone has soul which is a part of the Almighty. Lord Krisna says to Arjuna in *The Geeta* thus:

Vidya vinay sampanne , Bhahamane gavi hastini,
Swanishaiv swapake cha, panditah samdarsinah.

(5/18)

According to the translation of Swami Adgadanand it means, “Sages who look evenly at a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and even the most despicable of men are blessed with the highest degree of Knowledge” (170).

In his poem entitled 'Prayers to Lord Murugan', Ramanujan presents the picture of an ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love. Actually, Lord Murugan is Kartikeya, the son of Lord Shiva. In Dravidian culture, he is known as Murugan who is a 'six-faced god with twelve hands'. The Dravidians are the staunch devotees of sage Agatyasa who moved to the South India from North India for the betterment of society. Because of him the worship of Lord Shiva started in South India. Kartikeya or Murugan is the son of Shiva hence he is adored by them. In this poem, the poet presents Lord Murugan as the god of fertility as he writes thus:

Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand
in our fight
with the fruit fly
Tell us.

(Collected Poems, 114)

'Element of Composition' is a poem which has an influence of Indian philosophy as the poem presents the concept of the creation of human body and its four essential elements like water, air, fire and earth. The poet describes as follows:

Composed as I am, like others,
of elements on certain well-known lists,
father's seed and mother's egg
gathering earth, air, fire, mostly
water, into a mulberrybmass,

moulding calcium...

(Collected Poems, 121)

The same philosophy can be seen in *The Geeta* when lord Krishna says to Arjuna that:

Bhoomi raponalo vayuh kham mano buddhirev cha,

Ahamkar eteeyam me bhinna prakriti rastdha.

(7/4)

According to the translation of Swami Adgadanand it means, “I am the creator of all nature with its eight divisions earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, intellect, and ego”. The concluding lines of this poem touche the theme of the *Taittiriya Upanishad* as he concludes the poem, “Caterpillar on a leaf, eating/being eaten” (123).

Ramanujan starts his poem entitled ‘Questions’ with the quotation of *Mundakopanishad* as he begins the poem thus, “Two birds on the Self-same tree/ One of them eats the fruit of the tree./ The other watches without eating” (Mundaka3.1.1., Collected Poems, 130). This theme articulates the concept of ‘intertextuality’, which is a ‘term’ formulated by Julia Kristeva who derived it from the works of Ferdinand de Sussure and Mikhail Bakhtin. About Ramanujan’s intertextuality with Indian literature, Bruce King remarks, “Ramanujan’s poems have a high degree of intertextuality with Indian literature” (74). The poet assimilates the Upanishdic thoughts in this poem when he writes, “Eating, being eaten/ parts of me watch (Collected Poems, 130). Bruce King’s interpretation, again, is quite relevant at this place as he depicts:

The image of the Caterpillar eating and being eaten alludes to a well-known phrase in the Upanishads where it represents the continual recycling of the world of desire. Behind it is the notion that Parmatman or Brahman created air, fire, and water which brought forth the earth. From earth came the plants, seeds, food and man. That we come from earth, live by food, and return to Brahman eventually.

The Taittiriya Upanishad (3.10.5) says, “I am that food which eats the eater of food”.

A.K.Ramanujan has translated this as Food chain, Sanskrit, style’ (100).

Ramanujan’s poem entitled ‘A Minor Sacrifice’ (remembering the dead in My Lai 4) has mythical background of *Srimad Bhagwat Mahapurana* in which thirsty king Parikshit begged water to a sage who was in the supreme condition of meditation and did not listen to the words of the king. King became angry and swaddled a dead snake around his neck. The sage’s son could not tolerate king’s blunder and cursed him to die within seven days by snake biting. The poet describes this as follows:

I’d just heard that day
of the mischievous king in the epic
who kills a snake in the forest
and thinks it would be such fun
to garland a sage’s neck
with the cold dead thing,
and so he does,
and promptly earns a curse,
an early death by snakebite.

(Collected Poems, 144)

After the demise of his father, king Janmejaya organized Nagsuya Yagya for taking the revenge of his father’s death. The poet writes about it in the second stanza of the poem thus:

His son vows vengeance
and performs a sacrifice,
a magic rite

that draws every snake from everywhere,
till snakes of every stripe
begins to fall
through the blazing air
into his alter fires.

(Collected Poems, 144)

The poem has actually been written in the form of ballad and it tells the story of an uncle, his son and Shivanna.

In this way, we may see that the poetry of A.K.Ramanujan has an explicit connection with Indian themes. Even though Ramanujan spent a long time in the U.S.A., yet he did not give up his hindu sensibility and love for India. He, himself, acknowledged this fact in his essay 'Classics Lost and Found' that, "My poem, too, talks about some Indian attitudes to the Indian past, with which I was somewhat despondently preoccupied at the time" (quoted by Bruce King, 95).

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