



Nostalgic element in Ramanujan's poetry

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Abstract

Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan also known as A. K. Ramanujan is an Indian poet and scholar of Indian Literature who writes in both English and Kannada. Ramanujan is a poet, scholar, a philologist, folklorist, translator and playwright. His poetry is an example of an Indian poet in English who gets strength from going back to his roots. Ramanujan poems are known for the unforgettable images, invocations in language, familial reactions, ironic descriptions, Hindu familial themes, Indianness, nostalgia, fear and anxiety and host of other things. The family of Ramanujan is one of the central metaphor. The poems of Ramanujan is like a mirror in which one can see the face of Indian tradition.

Keywords- Hindu, nostalgia, scholar, playwright

Introduction

Ramanujan has been in America for pretty long time, for thirty years and his close and prolonged contact with America, America life, America culture and American literature had its own impact on him. Consequently, there is tension in his mind but this tension is a creative tension and this tension is at the back of his many best poems. As Sivaram Krishna points out that Ramanujan's poetry derives its depth and density from this mingling in his mind of western modernity and Hindu orthodoxy. So his poetry reveals the Indianness in unmistakable terms. Of course, Western modern influence is noticeable in the use of ironic and imagistic mode and despite this obvious western influence, the typical Indian experience is the core, the kernel of his poetry. William Walsh, in this regard, says that he is "unlike Ezekiel, deeply possessed of, or by the Indian ethos and psyche in its pure Hindu form." His poetry very much makes it clear that it is steeped in unmistakable Indian sensibility. His poetry, will reveal his Indian sensibility in his search for self, his family concerns, his philosophic vision of life, use of Indian myths and legends and his invocation to the Indian milieu in all its complexity.

As compared to Ezekiel, who lives in India and is committed to Indian environment, Ramanujan living in the U.S.A. for thirty years looks across an alien culture and a vast ocean and finds his roots in the Indian myths and tradition. So in one way, this apparent 'alienation from the immediate environment has been a blessing and prompted him his 'continuity with an older ideal' (with an Indian historical tradition). There is



always the presence of the past in his poetry. He is not of those who hope for a future, without organically remembering the past. His personal and familial conflicts and frustrations are constantly related to the Indian intellectual and social environment; both present and past So the individual and the particular is generalised and universalized. In the words of Sivaram Krishna “History for Ramanujan contemporizes itself largely through the intricate network of familial relations with the figures of father and mother dominating the interior landscape, a parental authoritarianism which atrophies, ironically, the poetic marital relations.”

Obsession with the past

It has been rightly said that poetry is born out of personal perception. So in Indian English poetry, the poet often turns to the world within “to weave a poetic yarn for the world outside.’ But Ramanujan’s is a bit different case. His long stay abroad, at Chicago, explains his pre-occupation and obsession with his Indian past-both familial and racial. So this obsession with the past constitutes a major theme in all his poetry. It is a matter of surprise that the American scene and setting, the European life and literature and its impact on his mind never inspired him to write about contemporary life around him. The poet seems to:

“Recognise nothing present
to his concave eye groping only
for mother and absences.

Past seems to have unforgettable experience of his life that is clings to him and its consciousness colours his love poetry. In *The Love Poem for a Wife-I*, he regrets that,

“ Really what keeps us apart
At the end of years, is unshared
Childhood...”

So in this persistent pre-occupation with the past results in the poetry in which memory plays a vigorous creative role.

Nostalgic elements in ‘Extended Family’

”Extended Family“ is one of the most significant poems by Ramanujan, presenting most artistically his treatment of the familiar and the racial memories The poem explores the various aspects of real and imaginary , clocks and calendars to suggest that time is woven into the very fabric of the body that is intermeshed with the co-extensive webs we call self, family and race. Temporality therefore manifests itself in human consciousness in several domains simultaneously It is not merely in its thought content, which is highly dense and philosophic, but also in its formalistic and stylistic innovations that Ramanujan leaves a lasting mark here in this poem.



Yet like grandfather
I bath before the village crow

the dry chlorine water
my only Ganges

the naked Chicago bulb
a cousin of the Vedic sun

slap soap on my back
like father

and think
in proverbs

like me
I wipe myself dry

with an unwashed
Sears turkish towel

Located in Chicago, the poet's memory catapults him into the past reminding him of the bathing ritual of his father. The poet tells himself that he, in a way, is re-enacting the habits, practices and rituals of his ancestors, as his successors would imitate him in their daily lives, There is thus a continuity with some minor change of context only. The poet also bathes like his grandfather before the village compound, even though the locale has differed a great deal. Whereas his grandfather used the water from the sacred Ganges, the poet makes do with chlorinated water. There is no Vedic sun in Chicago, only a naked bulb which can be taken to a cousin of the mythical Sun. It is not only his grandfather but also his father whom the poet resembles or who continues to live in the activities of the poet. The poet slaps soap on his back as his father used to. Even in his thinking, he falls back on proverbs, which is something his father in a way lives in him. The poet ironically comes to describe how in some respects he is his own self. The way he dries himself with an unwashed Turkish towel is his own habit. Obviously his grandfather and father would not have had Turkish towels. They would not also have used something unwashed to dry themselves with.

“Hindu to His Body”

“Hindu to His Body” is a very important poem by Ramanujan which defines the nature of his relationship with his roots. He is a Hindu and how this heritage comes in the way of his adapting himself to the modern context forms the subject matter of this poem. The poet deals in a very subtle but perceptive manner the body versus spirit divide as Hindus look at it. The poem is representative not merely of Ramanujan’s philosophic theme but also his use of precise and apt imagery. The poet’s longing for a conscious transformation of himself from a body to the sap of trees has very well been represented through deployment of appropriate stylistic devices. The poem remains one of Ramanujan’s most popular and much anthologised poems.

' Dear pursuing presence,
dear body: you brought me
curled in womb and memory
Gave me fingers to clutch
at grace, at malice; and ruffle
someone else 's hair; to fold a man 's
shadow back or his world
to hold in the dark of the eye
through a winter and a fear
the poise, the shape of a breast;
a pear 's silence, in the calyx
and the noise of a childish fist.

One of the recurrent concerns in Ramanujan’s poetry is the nature of human body and its relation to the nature world. The poem suggests that the human body appears to be entirely natural; it is contained in nature and returns after death or ought to be return to nature. But from the orthodox Hindu point of view, the body is just a vehicle for the spirit and thus it is a merely physical phenomenon. Ramanujan strikes a non-conventional note here. He shows his attachment to the physical self. It is a "dear pursuing presence" for him. It is this body which has given him an a entity in the world, literally giving him birth in the womb and by giving him memories of physical experience. It is this physical self which enabled the poet to “clutch at grace” with his fingers, feel it, experience it, face situation pleasant or unpleasant, express his feelings by ruffling someone else’s hair. This physical self has enabled the poet to have a shadow which spreads in length as the day opens and then gets shortened as the sun reaches on top of the person concerned, giving the impression as if it has been folded. It is a bodily self alone which enables one to experience physical



sensations, to see things from the dark of the eye, and to feel through the changing seasons and fluctuating feelings, the poise of a gesture, the beauty of the female anatomy (“the shape of a breast”), the grace of nature (“a pear’s silence”). It is significant to note how the poet is referring to the synthesis in the operation of the different sensory organs.

A deeply philosophical poem “The Difference”

“The Difference” is a poem by Ramanujan concerned 'with the scrutiny of his own faith, pitting his traditional Hindu faith against the skeptic, agnostic, even atheistic strains his mind had been exposed to during his stay abroad. It looks at the relationship between man and god and the manner in which one affects the other or to put it differently, between the godliness of man and the humanity of god. The title, in a way, is a pointer to this double edged theme, suggesting in which respects one exercise differs from the other. The poem is a good example of Ramanujan's self-introspective mood wherein he shuffles his own memories - personal as well as racial - to find in them some pattern, some meaning which can provide him some meaning in the flux of life. Even stylistically and formally the poem is a good example of the poet's self-denigrating, mocking and ironical tone and his highly dense and imagistic method.

but I know I’ve no way at all of telling
the look,
if any, on his face, or of catching
the rumoured beat of his extraordinary heart.

The poet-persona has made, out of the left-Over material, the big toe of Vishnu in his Vamanavatar and he believes that by looking at this big toe of the God, he can perhaps guess how huge the full statue of the god would be. But the poet is sure that he cannot go beyond that. He has no way at all of guessing the expression in the eyes of the God when it is made. Nor can he catch the extraordinary beatings of the Godly heart. An artist can make a statue but it would only catch the outer form of a God, as it is believed to be. The artist cannot infuse godliness to it. Believers, in a way, see God in a statue. They transfer their own faith in God to the statue. It is with the belief in the hearts of the devotees that the heart of a God in statue form beats.

”The Difference” is a deeply philosophic poem by Ramanujan. Its outward simplicity is deceptive. It presents most effectively 'the difference' between the traditional view of Gods and the poet’s personal view. The poem is an expression of the poet’s relationship with his racial heritage. He owns his links with it but he, at the same time, is only too well aware of the manner in which he charts a different course himself. Therefore the poem comes to have a juxtaposition of the two attitudes, bringing in the element of irony and apparent incongruity. The elaborate imagery of statue making out of clay provides the raw materials, literally as well as figuratively, out of which the philosophic message of the poem has been carved. The poem is an excellent introduction to Ramanujan’s thematic concerns and poetic devices. The poem also



illustrates the self-introspective mood wherein the poet shuffles his own perceptions - personal as well as racial - to find in them some pattern, some meaning which can provide him some meaning in the flux of life. Even formally and stylistically, the poem exemplifies the poet's self-denigrating, mocking and ironical tone and his highly dense and imagistic method.

Conclusion

Ramanujan's poetry is a recollection of emotions, memory unfolds itself in his mind. He has the memories of the south India family life. Indian sensibility is present in almost all images. Ramanujan is neither exclusively obsessed with the past more with the present. Most of his poems deal with nostalgia but he treats them in a general, objective and detached way. Thus his creative writings and his translations express a unified sensibility. His consciousness of something worthwhile in Indian myth and tradition with which he seeks identity and which has grown sterile in the present. A. K. Ramanujan establishes him as outstanding poets. He is one of the most distinguished poets who bear the best features of his rich native culture and the detached outlook resulting from his exposure to the western environment for a considerable period of time.

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