



Native Elements in The Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan

Dr.Richa Kumari
M.A, Ph.D
J.P.University, Chapra

Abstract

In A.K Ramanujan's poetry, the two factors of his life –Indian past and American present – are complimentary to each other. To him the Eastern and the Western are the two lobes of brain that can co-exist. Ramanujan's four collections The Striders, Relations, Second Sight, and The Black Hen are replete with the fond memories of the past and especially of his relations and home. His poetry is a wonderful expression of Indian sensibility, sharpened and nourished by Western education and environment.

Keywords: -multi-splendoured,myriad-minded, transcreators,linguist, folklorist, encapsulates, marginal, anthropology, harmonization

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan occupies a prominent place as an Indian English poet of the post-independence era. “A multi-splendoured and myriad- minded creative genius” (Armstrong,119), Ramanujan has scaled the dizzying heights in the galaxy of well-acknowledged translators and trans-creators of the world of poetry. His poetry has a distinctive richness that has resulted from his unique encounters with divergent cultures and nationalities and also due to his artistic interests and practices in various genres such as linguistics and folklore, poetry and philosophy, religious faith and scriptures, South-Indian Brahminical native traditions and Western shaping influences. Consequently, his diverse engagements as a poet, linguist, short story writer, critic, folklorist, painter, polyglot and an expatriate academician confirm his astonishing intellectual stamina.

Ramanujan's poetry attained the zenith of popularity by virtue of its enduring quality born out of a conflict between tradition and modernity. Yet, he stresses over an avoidable harmonization and assimilation of the desirable and deserving aspects of both tradition and modernity. In fact, his poetry is a queer expression of the conflicts between Indian ethos, which is inherent in him and the Western ethos, which he absorbed in U.S.A. This is how, the East and West shaped his intellectual poetic sensibility. He himself writes how he acquired the knowledge of linguistic, anthropology along with English for his outer forms and how the native tradition of Kannada, Tamil, the Classics, Folklore, his personal and professional preoccupations, his strong



Hindu or Brahminical roots, cultural and mythical influences gave him the inner core or substance of his poetry. This unique fusion riveted by his nostalgic reflections of the past.

Of all these virtues present in Ramanujan's poetry, the most dominant and distinguishing feature of his poetry is his authentic representation of the indigenous tradition and native culture in the artistic terms. In the connection Dr. A. N Dwivedi rightly observes:

“One of the distinguishing features of Ramanujan's poetry is the autochthonousnes. Indian myth and history, her people and customs, her rich cultural and spiritual heritage: these form the dominant themes of his poetry. Even a cursory glance at it convince the reader that Ramanujan has not severed his associations with India despite his long residence in the United States of America.He rather frequently resorts to native themes and traditions.”(p.83).

Ramanujan's four volume of poetry – *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1986), and *The Black Hen* (1995) exhibit to the large extent that it is the ancient tradition of South India to which he belonged shaped his mind and determines his attitude to life. Though the medium is foreign, still his poetry captures his holistic consciousness of the multi-facetedness dimensions of Indian mystic, spiritual, social locate the Hindu way of life in his poems which is nothing but a part of his consciousness.

Religion and history, language and landscape, of one's own country are the most important ingredients of the post-colonial poetry. A person's identity is, essentially determined by and related to social and historical factors. In case of Ramanujan, the poet is so deep rooted in Hindu religion that in the poem after poem, he has labored much to form a link between him and his Hindu past. The impact of his native religion and philosophy is fairly perceptible in his writings.

“Conventions of Despair”, one of Ramanujan's finest poems appeared in “The Striders” in 1966, Ramanujan expresses an Indian sensibility, sharpened by Western education. The poet is caught in the dilemma of a modern educated India, rejects both the modern and the Hindu conventions of despair in the archaic, presumably because it began with existence itself. The other despair are mere conventions of a particular people or a particular time. In this poem the poet passes from personal experience. He seeks solace and comfort in the past of the community. He traces his roots back to India's common heritage of myth and tradition.

The poem begins with a reference to the poet's awareness that he should be modern. He condemns modernity which is like hell where the poet would be treated as ‘the Marginal Man’. I should smile dry eyed and nurse martinis’. He cannot part with his Hindu Consciousness:

I must seek and will find

My particulars hell only in my hindu mind. (CP 34)

What us the hell, envisaged by Ramanujan? He describes it in detail in the following words:

*Must translate and turn
Till I blister and root
For certain lives to come, 'eye deep'
In those Boiling Crates of Oil; weep
Iron tears for winning what I should have lost;
See Them with lidless eyes
Saw precisely I two equal parts
one of the sixty four arts
They learn in That Place
A once-beloved head
At the naked parting of hair. (CP 34)*

The torture becomes all the shocking when he sees:

*...a grand child bare
Her teen-age flesh to the pimps
Of ideal Tomorrow's cowfoot eyes
And the theory of a peacock-feathered future. (CP 35)*

The poet rejects both the modern and the Hindu conventions of despair and prefers the 'archaic despair/It's not obsolete yet to live/in the many – lived lair/of fears, this flesh'.

Thus, in "Conventions of Despair", its theme and content, encapsulates Ramanujan's thematic and stylistic concerns. This poem begins in the midst of an argument that has created an upsetting tussle in the poet's psyche as neither he is willing to adopt the values modernism, indicting his migration to Western culture, nor does he venerate everything related to asceticism, indicating his deep-rootedness in Hindu culture. Without realization of the dangers involved in being modernized, the poet reiterates politely that 'I cannot unlearn/conventions of despair' (CP 34) as he considers them as part of the game called life. The hardcore truth about the Hindus is that they are prone to sorrow and sufferings, to the ways of prayers and penance, to the practice



of *tapasya* and meditation. Hence his commitment to seek and find his ‘particular hell’ only in his ‘Hindu mind’ is justifiable.

An extensive stay in the U.S. has also made Ramanujan realize what R. Parthasarthy writes in his ‘Exile’:

There is something to be said for exile:

You learn roots are deep. (p. 15)

The more the poet lives and writes abroad, the more he becomes aware of his deep Indianness. Indianness is not only a part of his past, but what continues to live in him, condition and regulate his behavior, attitudes and values. The poet proudly acknowledges the continual influence of the inherited value system and thereby affirms his deep and live relationship with people and places of the past.

A.K. Ramanujan’s poetry deals with the both individual and racial memory. Memory becomes a vital factor in keeping alive his relationship with India, within and without. It is more than a psychological prop or support. It is the very emotional base and creative spring board. To refer to memory as a major theme in Ramanujan’s poetry in a way belittles its significance. It is not an object observed or experience analyzed. Memory is the poet, his poetry is his memory, he writes on and his memory. The act of remembering is not a dull cud chewing of the past: it rings alive all in his past that is usable. It is not a kind of sentimental nostalgia that hampers progress and refuses to see any good in the here and the now. It is an active lingering to leap forward with vigour. An active memory helps to establish rootedness. The awareness and assurance of rootedness in turn establishes emotional stability and enables him to integrate the past and the present, the immediate and the remote, all that is within and without, the Western work-orientedness and the Indian work-relatedness. Most of his work in U.S. is related to his roots in India -Dravidian Linguistics, anthropology and translation of Indian literary texts. His primary agenda is not to interpret or promote his exotic “Hindu India” to an alien audience. It is a simple act of being true to himself and his relatedness from which he derives sustenance. It is also an act of homage to his Indian heritage. Every poem bears testimony to the presence of the past, the vital relationship with people, with family, culture, language and country.

The poem “No Fifth Man”, is based on a Sanskrit parable from Vishnu Sharma’s celebrated Panchatantra. The parable narrates the story of four learned Brahmins who acquire the miraculous *Sanjivni Vidya* that can breathe life into dead creatures. Though they are well versed in Shastras, there is a lack of practical common sense in them. They resuscitate a dead tiger without any realization of their deed. The false show of their knowledge take their lives as the tiger, in turn, devours them all but the fifth one has a little common sense is saved as he climbs

up a tree before all the four Brahmins are casting *mantras* on the making a poem with the exercising of the *Sanjivni Vidya*.

Thus almost all his poems involve a fullness of being in which the dualistic concept of *Nara- Narayan* or *I and Thou* get mingled into the one of the holistic consciousness and there creates a sense of divine rapture and aesthetic pleasure. In this connection, Rama Nair states:

“One’s natural desire for conceptual knowledge has to be renounced in favour of a non-conceptual knowledge that could lead to a whole new mode of knowing and loving in the spiritual wasteland. To Ramanujan, it perhaps lay in an unconditional surrender to God”(p.149).

In fact, it is necessary to note that in India, the dialectic of religious narrative has taken multifaceted dimensions of interpretation. With the development of literary history, religious poetry provided a central framework of reference to the concept of religion in India. *Bhakti* poetry has got the status of becoming one of the chief factors that made the social fusion in the middle ages possible. Another concept of Hindu religion that influences Ramanujan much is that of Mysticism which can be defined as a system of contemplative prayer and spirituality in which emphasis is on achieving direct intuitive perception of divine.

His uniqueness of combining the classical Sanskrit tradition along with the Tamil classical flavor with an added perspective of Hindu mythology provides a rare objectivity to his poetry. Ramanujan himself accepts by the Tamil poetry in which he observed:

...the landscape, the personae, the appropriate moods, all become a language within language.
Like a native speaker, he makes “infinite use of finite means”, to say with familiar words what has been said before; he can say exactly what he wants to, without even being aware of the ground –rules of his grammar(p.114-15)

The religious aspect of his poetry owes its origin equally well to the Kannada *Bhakti* poets. He was always allured by “the traditional tune-beat like the ritual gesture” and found it to be “too well organized to be organic” (Ramanujan. Speaking of Siva p.38).

Similarly, it is often alleged that Ramanujan’s ‘indifference’ stems from the influence of the concept of *Sthitaprajna* of *The Bhagwad Gita*. Thus, the magic of Ramanujan’s poetry is certainly rooted in his native linguistic tradition which is the ‘inner’ form of his creativity. Thus inner form certainly gets its ‘outer’ form from English and other disciplines like linguistics, anthropology and his encounter with the West.



Works Cited

Armstrong,S. “Poetic Sensibility and Translative Creativity of A.K.Raaamanujan”. The Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan, ed. by M.K. Bhatnagar (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd.

Dwivedi,A.N. “Theme and Form in Ramanujan’s Poetry”. The Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan, ed. By M.K. Bhatnagar. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd.New Delhi.

Nair, Rama. “Religious Poetry and Literary Criticism: A Note on A.K.Ramanujan’s *Speaking of Siva*”, Millenium Perspectives on A.K.Ramanujan.

Parthasarthy, R. “How It Strikes a Contemporary: The Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan”, *The Literary Criterion* xii,Nos, 2&3 (1976).

---. The Literary Criterion

---. *Speaking of Siva*. London:Penguin Classics, 1973