



Indigenous Sensibility and Representation of Personal Memory: A Critical Study of A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper	Indigenous Sensibility shows the author's deep connection with the culture, beliefs, customs and traditions, language and activities of everyday life of his native land. The study of Ramanujan's works proves that this sensibility is an important feature of his poetry. He has portrayed Indian culture and traditions, familial and ancestral memory, Indian myths and beliefs and everyday life in its true colour. It can be noticed that his poetry is deeply rooted in South Indian landscapes, villages and towns, old temples and houses, rivers and hills and family memories.
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A.K. Ramanujan is among the most influential modern poets in the history of Indian Writing in English. He is bilingual as he writes in English and his native language Kannada. He stands not only as a famous poet, but also as an internationally renowned translator. He also makes his permanent place among the writers of Indian diaspora whose works have prepared platform for cultural studies. Chidananda Das Gupta rightly remarks, "As with so many Indian writers living Abroad, it is the Indian experience, a whole storehouse of it that they carry inside, review, relieve from time to time and bring into contempt with present experience that nourishes Ramanujan's poetry. (195)"¹

Ramanujan's poetry expresses pure Indian or Desi sensibility sharpened and conditioned by Western education and environment. The poet himself throws light on the factors which contributed to the forming of his sensibility. He says, "English and my disciplines (linguistics; anthropology) give me my 'outer' forms–

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linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience; and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field-trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my 'inner' forms, images and symbols. (95)"²

Another factor which is worth noting here may be called the predicament of many Indian poets writing in English who find themselves to be the victims of linguistic isolation from their adoption of English as a medium of creative expression. The awareness of this predicament leaves a deep and profound impression upon the mind of Raja Rao, the well known novelist. He says, "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and missions of certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.(vii)"³

It is worth appreciating that Ramanujan could reach out from such a predicament to a state of creative freedom. His Indianess becomes a device which helps him in developing a framework within which the identities of the self could be brought out in their complexity. The views of K.R.S. Iyengar supports this view. He says, "What makes Indo-Anglian literature an Indian literature and not just a ramshackle outhouse of English literature, is the quality of its "Indianness-" in the choice of subject, in the texture of thought and play of sentiment, in the organization of material, and in the creative use of language."⁴

Ramanujan does not fail to acknowledge the influence of traditional Tamil and Kannada poetry on his poetic mind and language. He owns in an interview with Rama Jha, "Yes, my knowledge of English has been deeply affected by my knowledge of Indian literature and poetics..... if English cuts us from our culture, it won't get us very far..... Indian English when it is good does get its nourishment from each individual's knowledge of Indian culture and Indian languages. It certainly does for me. That is what bends us back to our childhood and early years.(182)"⁵

A deep study of Ramanujan's entire body of creative works shows that his poetry manifests the search of the modernist– the search for roots in the tradition and the search for a higher self, higher than the living self-diverted by the opposites of life. In fact, his poetry is indebted to the richness of the past experience and influence which he had during his formative years. S.K. Desai rightly remarks, "Ramanujan's expatriation is a marginal affair and his alienation is a myth created by critics. Though he lives in Chicago, he is all the time preoccupied with India, one of his continuing projects being collection of folk tales, proverbs, riddles which brings him to India once at least in two years."⁶

His diasporic consciousness helps him in exploring his self, reviewing it and reliving it from time to time and bringing it into contact with the present experience. It can be noticed that in his poetry familial



relationships, Indian culture and landscape, rural India and superstitions prevailed in Indian society serve as subjects. He brings out the gradual decline of old traditions and the manners how the modern society is still trying to hold on to. The poet knows very well that there is always a struggle for the self, cultural identity and one's own relations with regard to existential issues of humans who they are and from where they come. Raghavendra Rao is almost near the truth when he says, "In Ramanujan, the problem of life and poetry are at the base, one and the same. It is the problem of uniting within a single poetic structure or life, memory as the past, memory as the present and memory as the future.(24)"⁷

Ramanujan's Indigenous sensibility becomes an enticing source of charm for him as it gives a striking feature to his poetry. It helps him in standing an influential voice among his contemporary poets. His poetry is deeply rooted in Indian territory, Indian culture and society, different rituals, myths and traditions based on personal experience and memory. The house of Ramannjan's father in Mysore plays an important part in the personal landscape of the poet. His poem entitled 'Small-Scale Reflections on A Great House' is the portrait of his great house in Mysore. Mark the following lines of this poem:

“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.”⁸

The musical tone and repetition of a common phrase “lost long ago” helps the readers in perceiving that the poet's self has become a stage where the history of the ancient house is being presented. Each of the things "lost long ago" revives in the poet's memory an event to be recounted in terms of its pathos and near absurd complexity. S.C. Harrex writes, "The poet begins with an experience usually having an Indian basis (if only the poetic self) or an Indian setting, the experience then becomes a voyage into language and so it moved outside its place of origin (the more ancestral the place, with a few if any roots in English, the more hazardous yet for reaching the journey may be) then the experience and the expression return in the form of the finished poems.(210)"⁹

Ramanujan portrays the Indian scene from across the Atlantic with full artistic detachment and irony. His eyes do take on a merry twinkle while looking the Indian scene from across the Atlantic similiarly to those grown-ups who fall upon their children at play. It can be found out that most of the



poems about his family are tinged with irony. His poem entitled 'Still Life' is a good example in this connection. Mark :

“When she left me
after lunch, I read
for a while.
But I suddenly wanted
to look again
and I saw the half eaten
sandwich,
bread,
lettuce and salami,
all carrying the shop
of her bite.(157)”¹⁰

In fact, this ironic stance gives aesthetic validity to the confessional note in his poems, and his Indigenous sensibility finds its superb expression in the poems dealing with familial relationship. The views of Bruce King guides us as fallows, “Ramanujan is very much a modern poet, instinctively ironic, and has a mind packed with a wide variety of ideas and information. An intellectual at home with the latest concepts and theories, he is also concerned with Indian philosophy and literature, with family relationships in India and with himself as someone moulded by a wide variety of influences. His Indianness is a part of his past, the seed from which he has grown and to which he remains inextricably linked as he changes and develops.”¹¹

Ramanujan explores India's common heritage of myth and tradition through his poems. He also depicts contemporary ideas, foreign travel and rapid cultural transformations. In fact, the poet seeks his identity neither in Chicago nor in the immediate present, but in the mythical and literary past of India. His famous poem 'Chicago Zen' juxtaposes his present in Chicago with his past in India. He feels at home in Chicago, but he is not without his Indian roots and sensibility. He knows that his thoughts will always affect his individuality and temperament. The following lines of 'Conventions of Despair' are worth quoting. Mark:

“The Hindu consciousness is pervasive.
I must seek and will find
My particular hell in my Hindu mind.(34)”¹²



If one goes through his poem entitled 'Love Poem for A Wife 1', one finds that his personal experiences become universal. Marriage is a great institution in Indian culture and society. But at present both husband and wife complain against the behaviour of his or her life partner. The poet does not suffer from any inhibitions when he finds lack of emotions in his relationship with his wife. He knows that both of them have been apart emotionally though they have been married over a number of years. He thinks that this emotional alienation is the result of the fact that they have not been able to share each other's childhood experiences. Mark the following lines of the poem 'Love Poem for A Wife 1':

"Really what keep us apart
at the end of years is unshared
childhood. You cannot, for instance,
meet my father. He is some years
dead. Neither can I meet yours :
he has lately lost his temper
and mellowed."¹³

It is well known that the early years of life are the formative years. Without sharing each other's experiences of childhood there can be no real and emotional relationship between a husband and a wife. There are intricate descriptions of childhood memories and incidents focussing on emotional experiences of people in Indian and Western societies in his poems.

Besides it, Ramanujan does not hide social problems i.e., poverty, unemployment, gender inequality and environmental pollution faced by Indians. Due to economic inequality, the poor have to live very miserable and painful life. The poet has sympathy for the poor and the beggars of his motherland. Iyenger rightly observes, "Ramanujan summons from the hinterland of memory buried moments of suspense, surprise or agony, and turns them into disturbingly vivid poems. The mutilated beggar, the drowned woman—they are caught in their contortions and misery, and they are there, the Dante's hell."¹⁴ Ramanujan knows very well that all the major social problems can be solved with the help of better education policy, employment opportunities and shared responsibilities of the citizens and government machinery.

His poem entitled 'The Last of the Princess' throws light on his historical sensibility. The poet brings out the familial experiences with the help of his historical consciousness—wife, children, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and a host of other relatives appear in the poems based on historical background. Ramanujan portrays this type of relations in 'The Last of the Princess' with a feeling of pathos on the fall of



the Mughal empire. It is well known that after the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal dynasty fell on evil days, and gradually decayed and died out. Mark the following lines of this poem :

"Father, uncle, seven
folkore brothers, sister so young, so lovely
the snakes loved her and hung dead,
ancestral
lovers from her ceiling; brother's many
wives, their unborn, still-born babies,
numberless,
cousions, royal mynahs and parrots
in the harem.
everyone died"¹⁵

No doubt, Ramanujan had a superb influence of his Indian background and roots, but he was equally inspired by Modern English Poetry movements. Like the modern poets, he too recognises the importance of irony and paradox in poetry. He makes extensive use of all the modern devices in his poetry. His poems entitled 'The Striders', 'Snakes', 'Breaded Fish', 'Anxiety', 'Chicago Zen' and 'The Twin-Lobed Brahmin' are a good example in this connection. The following quote by Bruce King supports this view. Mark : "The word play, puns, inner rhymes, rhetorical devices, ironies, distanced, neutrality of tone, understatement, compression and elliptical progression of the poems have similarities to his translations. This does not mean Ramanujan is unaffected by his readings of Yeats, Eliot and other moderns (who have influenced him), but he is highly aware of the conventions, techniques and structures of Indian verse and these have been used and transformed in his English Poetry.(116)"¹⁶

Athe summing up, we can say that Ramanujan's poetry gives voice to pure Desi sensibility sharpened by western education and environment. It can be noticed that some aspects of Indianness which he portrays have a universal appeal, and his Indian sensibility gets its superb voice in the poems dealing with familial relationships. We can conclude with Taqi Ali Mirza's assessment of 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. His particular hell is our common heritage. Almost all the critics writing on Ramanujan's poetry have stressed, with varying degrees of emphasis the element of familial relationship in his poetic consciousness, and have tried to make it the principal source of his inspiration..... His sense of



history, his projection of individual experience as part of a social milieu, is so acute that he is able always to keep a delicate balance between the ephemeral and permanent.(169)"¹⁷

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