



IMAGE OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIP IN THE POETRY OF A.K.RAMANUJAN

BIONOTES

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ABSTRACT

A native of Mysore, India, AttipatKrishnaswamiRamanujan grew up during the latter part of English rule in India, exposing him to the languages that would form his life's work as a poet and translator. Ramanujan's work reveals that cultural tradition in India is a conflict between the colonial English identity of the country as well as its historic and post-colonial ethnic identities. His work a mixture of the complex languages of which he was a master, is a production of flowing, metaphoric syntax and extremely concentrated composition.

He was born in Mysore, India in 1929, came to the U.S. in 1959, where he remained until his death in Chicago on July 13, 1993. Not only was Ramanujan a transactional figure, but he was also a trans-disciplinary scholar, working as a poet, translator, linguist, and folklorist. Although he wrote primarily in English, he was fluent in both Kannada, the common language of Mysore, and Tamil, the language of the family as well.

Ramanujan received his B.A and M.A in English language and literature from the University of Mysore. He then spent some time at several universities in South India before getting a graduate diploma in theoretical linguistics from Deccan University in Poona in 1958. The following year, he went to Indiana University where he got a Ph.D. in Linguistics in 1963.

In 1962, he became an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, where he was affiliated through the rest of his career. However, he did teach at several other U.S. Universities at times. At the University of Chicago, Ramanujan was instrumental in shaping the South Asian studies program. In 1976, the Govt. of India awarded him the honorific title 'Padma Shri', and in 1983 he was given the MacArthur Prize Fellowship.

A.K.Ramanujan's theoretical and aesthetic contributions span several disciplinary areas. In his cultural essays such as "Is There An Indian Way Of Thinking?" (1990) he explains cultural ideologies and behavioral manifestations thereof in terms of an

Indian Psychology he calls “context-sensitive” thinking. In his work in folklore studies, Ramanujan highlights the intertextuality of the Indian oral and written literary tradition. His essays “Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward An Anthology Of Reflections”(1989), and his commentaries in *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a classical Tamil Anthology*(1967) and *Folktales From India, Oral Tales From Twenty Indian Languages*(1991) are good examples of his work in Indian folklore studies. His ideas about Indian Sociolinguistics, language change, and language creativity can be found in his 1964 essay written with W. Bright, “Sociolinguistic Variation And Language Change” finally a collected work of his poetry was posthumously published in 1995, *The collected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan*, which includes poems from several previously- published volumes of poetry as well as some previously unpublished poems.

He is a leading poet of Indian English Literature. He is well known globally for his excellent and special depiction of Indian sensibilities drawn from Indian life and culture. A. Krisnaswami, his father was known for his peculiar and deep interest in Sanskrit and Tamil literature, what influenced the child Ramanujan. From his educated mother passed down the knowledge of the Tamil and Kannada novels, while his grandmother enriched him with the Tamil tales. A well known translator of Tamil and Kannada poems into English, Ramanujan, maintained his touch with Indian culture and life in spite of his long way in United States Of America as a professor of Linguistics from 1963 to till his death in 1993. Its wonderful that his belief and practice in Indian culture and life had been retained by him unbelievably till his death, even though he settled permanently in USA. His encyclopaedic knowledge of India and its culture and western culture is superbly exploited in his poems in order to express an extraordinary feelings of Indian Diaspora making a decent blending of both cultures.

Ramanujan wrote poetry almost in English. Reviewer Bruce King called Ramanujan, along with two other trans-cultural poets, “Indo-Anglian harbingers of literary modernism”. This description highlights several characteristics of Ramanujan’s poetry, perhaps less common on other trans-cultural poetry. Characteristics of his modernist style include an almost jarring realism and hints at a kind of confessional style. Ramanujan discusses the first poem, “Astronomer” in “Is There An Indian Way Of Thinking?”. He says that this poem is about his father ,SrinivasaRamanujan, who was a famous mathematician. He describes his father:

He was a mathematician, an astronomer. But he was also a Sanskrit scholar, an expert astrologer. He had two kinds of visitors: American and English mathematicians who called on him when they were on a visit to India, and local astrologers, orthodox pundits who wore splendid gold-embroidered shawls dowered by the Maharaja. I had just been converted by Russel to the ‘scientific attitude’. I (and my generation) was troubled by his holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology: I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he didn’t seem to care about, or even think about.

“Astronomer” is an attempt to make sense of his father’s seemingly contradictory image.

*‘Sky -man in a hole
With astronomy for dream,
Astrology for nightmare;
Fat man full of proverbs,
The language of lean years,
Living in square after
Almanac square
Prefiguring the day
Of windfall and landslide....*

Ramanujan has evolved as a very important Indian poet through his collections of poems, written over a period ranging more than three decades. In spite of his constant exposure to American beliefs and culture he has consistently written about India.- not as an obsession, but as a source of inspiration. One deserves in his writings a possibility that an artist as an individual is capable of doing of reconstructing a personal (Indian) past and nourishing the same as insulated from the ideological oppositions that affect the time and space in which his text is written. While recreating the Indian settings- both rural and urban, he seems to be unaffected by the objects and images of his American surrounding because the life he captures looks so original and just not a memory game. “His exile in Chicago only strengthened his sense of the Indian past: his disturbingly vivid and agile poetic articulations both in English and Kannada are deeply rooted in the myth, folklore, history, culture and ethos of his native soil.” Says K.Satchidnandan in his editorial comment in a commemorative volume on Ramanujan.while recreating the human situations and details of Indian life the image of family appears as a key image.(Poetry Of A.K.Ramanujan-M.K.Bhatnagar.pg76)

A.K.RAMANUJAN(1929-1993), whose four volumes published by the Oxford University Press has earned recognition of his merits and talents,- the four volumes being *The Striders*(1966), *Relations*(1971), *Second Sight*(1986), and the *Black Hen*(1995). He is also known to the literary world as a translator of the famous vachanas from Kannada and some of the love lyrics from the *Kurunthohai*, a classical Tamil anthology. A professor of Linguistics and Dravidian studies at the university of Chicago, Ramanujan handles his medium with a sure touch of an unerring craftsman devoted to glowing images and surcharged diction. The family serves as a ‘ central metaphor’ to him. His favorite themes are: Indian men, women and their manners, family and relatives, love and life and death, and cultural conflicts. As a poet of live he is warm and intimate, and his images are conveyed through memorable phrases and sensuous images, as in the following:

*Flames have only lung. Water is all eyes.
The earth has bone for muscle. And the air*

Is a flock of invisible pigeons.

But anxiety can find no metaphor to end it.

Through chiseled phrases and striking metaphors the poet has achieved the maximum success here. Ramanujan has the ability to build a whole rhythmic poem out of a trifling incident, and 'The Striders' is a glaring example of it. (Papers On Indian Writing In English:poetry-A.N.Dwivedi.pg-8-9)

Home or family is central to Ramanujan's creative consciousness, both as a social or cultural unit or institution and as a concept or idea. In "A Wobbly Top" Ramanujan tries to capture the dynamic sustaining relationship between the father and the son. The woobly top- a gift from the father- is dear to the son. This gift, retains, scars within which are not visible, because of the top's fast rotation. The top, therefore, stands for the memory of the father. The top as a gift illustrates the vastness of the relationship that exists between the father and the son..thus the poem begins with the image of the father but gets concluded with the vastness of a relationship to which the son is exposed.

Similarly the poem "Of Mothers Among Other Things" begins with the poet's self that relates itself to the mother's 'twisted black bone tree"(CP61), and ends with the image of the self that licks bark in the mouth after observing the sensible fingers picking up grain of rice from the "kitchen floor"(CP61)

In "Love Poem For Wife1" and "Love Poem For Wife 2" Ramanujan illustrates the ambivalent nature of his own self, the self of the wife and the relationship between these two selves of the husband and the wife. The Poem 1 begins with the difference between the husband and the wife, through the image of the unshared childhood, and progresses through patterning of differences. He tries to bring out a hypothetical solution to this problem of ambivalence. The solution has been casually, tentatively presented, so that the irony used retains a double edge, first at his own self and then at the superstition-ridden practice of the childhood marriage in the Hindu families.

'Or we should do as well-meaning

Hindus did,

Forestalling separate horoscopes

And mothers' first period,

And wed us in the oral cradle

And carry marriage back into

The namelessness of childhoods.(CP67)

The poet's subtle irony reveals that there is the possibility of sharing childhood on child marriage, but that does not ensure harmony of relationship between husband and wife in later years. Similarly in 'Poem2' the poet shows the difference between himself and his wife who wears always a "changing syriac face". In spite of her anger, the poet has no hesitation to lose his face in her to become 'androgynous as a god'(CP84), and to become happy. Ramanujan, in the course of reflecting the diverse

strands of his relationship, touches on other individuals of the family, and on social rituals and institutions too. (Poetry Of Ramanujan, M.K. Bhatnagar-pg51-52)

Ramanujan poems are known for their unforgettable images, innovations in language, familial relations, ironic descriptions, Hindu themes, Indianness, nostalgia, fear and anxiety and a host of other things. It has been observed that in Ramanujan the image out-turns the idea. In this respect he has sometimes been contrasted with Nissim Ezekiel in whom the idea eludes the image. Parathasarathy (1994) maintains that in Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Mehrotra and Kumar, the image is not only the spring board of poetic-composition, but the Kernel as well.

In 'Looking For A Cousin On A Swing' also Ramanujan uses visual symbols;

*When she was four or five
She sat on a village swing
And her cousin, six or seven,
Sat himself against her*

...

*And afterwards
We climbed a tree, she said
Not very tall, but full of leaves
Lie those of a fig tree*

The fig leaves and the 'swinging' and 'climbing' a tree are all symbolic of the garden of Eden. It recalls the innocence and joy which Adam and Eve enjoyed in Paradise. The fig tree of her childhood, which were just leaves, later becomes a symbol of experience. Thus the image of the past which were those of innocence, during her village life contrasts with later life where they are those of experience in the context of metropolitan life she lives.

Love Poem To A Wife" is one of the popular poems of Ramanujan where he is at his best as a poet who writes on family relations. He tries to draw a contrast between his predicament and that of his wife's in the opening stanza itself.

*....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.*

The contrast drawn is between his father who is already dead and his father-in-law who is not dead but has lost his temper. However he has mellowed. As is expected in a poem like this, the poet talks about his father, father-in-law, cousins, grand-parents, sister-in-law, aunts and so on. He has something to say about his brother-in-law also:

*Only two weeks ago, in Chicago
You and brother James started
One of you drag-out fights*

*About where the bathroom was
In the backyard.*

About his sister-in-law he remarks:

.....sister-in-law

And I were rather blank, cut -outs

Sitting in our respective

Slots in a room.

*There is also a reference in the poem to Benjamin Uncle in Kuwait
who*

Would say about the bathroom

And the well and the dying

In short, the speaker's nostalgia and the reference to several of his relatives make this poem a unique one on familial themes. In his other poems like 'looking and finding', 'Chicago Zen', 'History', 'Small Scale Reflections On A Great House', 'Relations', 'The Last Of The Princes', 'Snakes', 'Conventions Of Despair' etc. (Indian writings In English- M.K.Bhatnagar vol8,pg-43,50-51,54)

Ramanujan's tones and temperaments fascinate the critical privilege of the people because of his poetic height and perception. Bruce King bewrays this idea;

'Ramanujan is widely read in India, along with western and western-influenced modern poetry in Indian languages. This unpredictable fusion of varied roots in Ramanujan's poetry is true of the attitudes it expresses.

The poet seeks direct meaning to life. He opines that poetry has no value without the meaning of life. He evinces his deep sympathy 'for a most disadvantaged section of Indian society, the women. Ramanujan's 'The Opposable Thumb' describes the oppression of women by their husbands. The hegemony and cruelty of men is implied by the granny's four fingers lost to her husband's 'knifing temper'.

Just one finger left of five, a real thumb no longer usual,

Casual, or opposable after her husband's knifing temper

One Sunday morning half a century ago.'

'In Still Another For Mother' the poet constrained relations between the aged man and woman. He sees that a man sees his wife and moves on straight without caring her back. The poet is quite unaware of this fact which has taken place between them:

'something opened

In the past and I heard something shut

In the future, quietly,

Like the heavy door,

Of my mother's black-pillared, nineteenth century

Silent house, given on her marriage day

To my father, for a dowry.'

The struggle between the man and the woman is the outcome of an earlier quarrel and is based on his family's past and perhaps on his own avenir. The words 'heavy door of my mother's black pillared', and 'silent house' suggest the sense of incoherent marriage. The old mother in 'Of Mothers Among Other Things' depicts the posture of the beholder with her sarees hanging loose on her lanky body like skeleton. The poet explicates his philosophical ideas this way:

'you cannot entirely live in the past, neither can you entirely in the present, because we are not like that. We are both these things. The past never passes- either the individual past or historical past or cultural past. It is with us, it is what gives us the richness of- what you call it- the richness of understanding.'

Ramanujan expresses the marriage problems and it consists of nostalgic memories of south Indian Hindu family relations. Denied a shared childhood, marital life is a disharmony. In the concluding part of the poem we find the implication of hyperbolic humor.

*'...Probably
only the Egyptians had it right:
Their kings had sisters for queens
To continue the incests
Of childhood into marriage.'*

Ramanujan's 'Looking For A Cousin On A Swing' attests how the innocent corporeal contexture of childhood becomes youthsomeness by sex, sexual perception and false pretension;

*'now she looks for the swing
In cities with fifteen suburbs
And tries to be innocent
About it,
Not only on the crotch of a tree
That looked as if would burst
Under every leaf
Into a brood of scarlet figs.'*

Ramanujan has effectively demonstrated to his contemporaries the supreme significance of having roots and has also shown glimpses of the vitality the work of a poet acquires when he succeeds partially in his attempt. Ramanujan has derived his poetic technique from the ancient Kannada and Tamil verse and the poets of today have synthesized oriental and occidental models into new forms. Ramanujan's technical accomplishment is incontestable and his thematic strategy is precisely the right one for a poet in his position. He has completely exploited the opportunities his materials offers him. Ramanujan's poetic technique is critically examined by M.K.Naik: 'in poetic technique, of all his contemporaries, Ramanujan appears to have the surest

touch. For he never lapses into romantic cliché. His unfailing sense of rhythm gives a fitting answer to those who hold that complete inwardness with language is possible only to a poet writing in his mother tongue. Though he writes in open forms, his verse is extremely tightly constructed. Ramanujan is very often extolled for his 'unique tone of voice', a feature that accounts for the characteristic style of his poetry.

To read Ramanujan's poetry is to believe in immense human possibilities. His poetry and polglottic genius cannot be tethered down to any age or any flux of time, but in him Indian sensibility gets its most genuine and potent expression. He observes the inalienable link between life and art and tries to touch the life into art. To him, as ChirantanKulshrestha assumes, 'life and art must connect at some point.' (Indian English literature- Basavraj Naikar.pg-4,5,6,8)

Critical and perceptive readers like I.N.Lall, C.Kulshreshtha, William Walsh, Ezeiel, R.Parthasarathy think that Ramanujan's poetry evinces the inevitability of being anchored to his rich literary and personal, familial past, with a varying degree of emphasis on the (indefinable) quality of Indianness in it. Ezekiel, for instance, thinks that Ramanujan's poems are 'Indian but untypically so'. William Walsh has observed that Ramanujan's manner has 'neither the agitation of his American context, nor the foggy quality inseparable from British English, and it communicates with complete ease an Indian sensibility'. I.N.Lall sees 'a curious combination of the east and west. The experience of the emotion is Indian but the mode of defining it is western.'

Ramanujan is basically a poet of memories. Of all the memories, the ones that are anchored to his familial, personal past make his poetry very redolent with the characteristics native element or the Indian experience. In fact, his alienation finds a consolatory transformation in his vivid, subtle and innumerable remembrances. All his poetic collections are full of poems inspired by the remote personal past, reminding the poet of umpteen incidents, relations, situations and experiences that are ineluctably associated with his family in relation to his own self. As A.N.Dwivedi puts it, "The most delicate and luminous of the poem are those which picture experience of India, and in particular his family life... Ramanujan is particularly striking when he portrays typical Hindu conventions and consciousness. In an interview Ramanujan says "Indians are writing poetry about what they know, about their experiences. They are not imitating British poetry." This observation holds good in the case of his own poetry too. It gives us a cue. Ramanujan first began to write in his first language, Kannada. In the initial stage he was fully involved with Kannada literature because many of his literary friends were Kannada writers whose writings he naturally read even in manuscripts. Along with Kannada, he knew Tamil as well. (Five Indian English Writers; Chindhade Shrish.pg-62-63)

CONCLUSIONS;

Prominent poet A.K.Ramanujan's poetry also bears the note of Indianness. Indian sensibility can be called one of the themes of his poetry. The Indian sensibility of Ramanujan is sharpened by his western education and environment. Ramanujan portrays the Indian scene from across the Atlantic with complete artistic detachment and irony. 'Obituary' another poem by Ramanujan is also entirely Indian in every

sense. As a writer Ramanujan had the experience of both the native as well as the milieu and as a result he was able to incorporate the cultures and conventions of both the east and the west. Ramanujan's poetry seemed to grow out of Indian experience and sensibility with all its memories of family, local place, images, beliefs and history. At the same time his writings included a modern stance with its skepticism, ironies and sense of living from moment in an ever changing world in which older values and beliefs are often considered as unrealistic. Ramanujan through his writing could evoke the warmth of traditional family life and closeness of long remembered relationships. More often he shows conflicts, arguments and surprises. He also showed that the supposed glory of Tamil cultural heritage is a fiction which ignored the reality of the past.

It can be said that Ramanujan's memory are located in the specific society of the Tamil Brahmins. His poems avoided vague generalizations about India and were set in particular situations or scenes or developed from reflections on specific topics. Nor did his fixed poem contain a fixed attitude or stance which the poems set out to communicate rather the poems changed direction and seemed unpredictable as they developed with the ending often different from the values implied at the beginning of the poem. The sophistication with which Ramanujan recreated and treated south Indian culture was also reflected in his techniques which like his translation often seemed a modern recreation of the spirit and methods of Tamil and Kannada verse.

The word play, puns, inner rhymes, rhetorical devices, ironies, distanced neutrality of tones, understatement, compression and elliptical progression of the poems had similarities to his translations. This does not mean that Ramanujan was not affected by the reading of Yeats and other contemporary writers but as a writer he was highly aware of the conventions, techniques and structures of Indian verse and these had been used and transformed in his English poetry. The complexity, instability and irony of Ramanujan's poems seemed very modern as was the way they appeared to offer themselves as imagistic statements to be appreciated and interpreted as the reader wishes. But one gets introduced with various introductions, prefaces and after words to Ramanujan's translations of medieval Kannada and Tamil verse revealed that what seems to be original and modern is partly based on older Indian conventions. The understated, neutral standing at a distance from descriptions can be found in the Tamil classics which he had translated. The use of the self as a centre for a poem filled with ironies which unpredictably changed directions and attitudes and which resisted conclusion is within the tradition of medieval saint's poetry.

Poems dealing with the familial motif explore and analyze the various relationships in a joint family. Parthasarathy points out that "In a traditional family the constituent members are lineal descendents as well as collaterals within three, and at times even four degrees of relationship. Economic help, refuge in situations of crisis, the upbringing of children are some of the benefits offered by the joint family. The family is, for Ramanujan, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks.' Ramanujan himself has defined and acknowledged the ineluctable rootedness into the family, in a

little poem translated from Tamil and prefixed as an epigraph to the second collection of his English poems, Relations:

*Like a hunted deer
On the wide white
Salt land,
A flayed hide
Turned inside out,
One may run,
Escape.
But living
Among relations
Binds the feet.*

The poem describes a large, traditional Hindu joint family, a great house...it is equally clear that the 'great house' in the poem, and with justice stand for the ancient house of Hinduism...a house which has its motto of VasudhaiwaKutumbakam(the entire earth is one family) has absorbed from time to time numerous cults, cultures and races to create one of the greatest examples of synthesis in all human history.

The family poems naturally present a wide variety of portraits. "The Opposable Thumb", although about an unpleasant incident that took place 'one Sunday morning half a century ago, is closely connected with the poet's family.

It is not an autobiographical poem and it begins rather obliquely with a blind boy having six fingers, then a muslin weaver's four fingers (the fifth finger, the thumb, was snapped off), and finally granny's just solitary finger because the other four ones were knifed by the ill-tempered husband.

Relations within the family are not just simple and direct blood connections but speculative, complex and distant too. "On The Very Possible Jaundice Of My Unborn Daughter" in "The Striders. The reference to jaundice is misleading: it only signifies the yellow tinge of the rays of the sun presented as the image of the sunflower (both characteristically Indian) and of the daffodils flapping in Grandma's hands. The pigment emanates 'from the sulphur mines of the sun'. Father sits basking in it- a typical Indian scene. An unbreakable link in the family lineage is thus suggested directly, stretching up/down to the unborn daughter.

The poems commemorating the poet's mother need to be considered together in order to understand the poet's attachment to the past and to the family."Still Another For Mother" from the Striders describes a brief flashback where the poet witnesses a tiff between a aged American couple on Hyde Park Street in America. Here the sensibility brought to interpret the experience is Indian, not American. The poet is instantly reminded of a similar incident involving his own parents:

*Perhaps they had fought.
Worst still, perhaps they had not fought
I discovered that mere walking was not polite*

And walked on, as if nothing had happened

To her, or to me; (Five Indian English Poets-Chindhade Shrishpg-66-68)

In the poem 'obituary' the poet presents in an ironical vein the tragic effect on the family due to sudden death of his father, causing repercussions on or affecting the whole family set-up. According to Dr.RaghukulTilak' The tone is flippant, mock-ironic, but is merely a cover to hide his essential seriousness and the poignancy of his grief.

The father bequeathed to his son

'dust on a table full of papers'

Left debts and daughters,

A bedwetting grandson

Named by the toss

Of a coin after him a house that leaned

Slowly through(our) growing

Years on a bent coconut

Tree in the yard.'

The poet's play of words in the lines

'being the burning type

He burned properly

At the cremation

As before, easily

And at both ends.'

It evokes sarcastic tone mixed with tears and helper's smiles. The ritualistic ceremonies and mixing of the dead person's ashes in holy water etc. seemed meaningless to the poet who experienced a void that nothing can fill in. his father hopes and aspirations too died. No memorial was setup to record his achievements which are almost insignificant. Yet the poet anxiously tried to find out the two lines written about his father in the obituary column in scraps of news paper.

This shows his unbroken blood relationship or the last thread of attachment in spite of his ironic digs at the negative achievements of his father. The changed mother, a relic of his father's death is indeed a sad remembrance of this tragic event that upsets the whole family.

Generally poems written on death ends with a philosophical resignation. But Ramanujan just presented the situation as it is, affecting the relationship in a realistic manner. There is a poignant undertone suggesting his father's miserable position who left nothing to his son except debts, responsibilities and expenses for performing annual ceremonies.

Thus Ramanujan in his quest for culture, tradition and Indian sensibility explored the theme of family relationships in multifarious ways, which gave him a base for creative use of English as well as study of human psyche in various ways.

Ramanujan's poetry abounds in family themes. Family images not only recreate the Indian cultural contexts but evoke in the readers universal human urges responsible for meaningful relationship. He shows us our own photographs, taken in India and processed in United States. Ramanujan through a brilliant simile describes how things that go out also come back, but in a changed manner. Those who go out of the house for greater opportunities back home disillusioned with more liabilities to the house. The return of the native is not a homecoming for jubilation but like the kind of Indian cotton processed muslin at Manchester to be sold in India at a high price. The stratification of Indian family and the presence of old rites and habits are reflected adequately by Ramanujan. (Poetry Of A.K.Ramanujan,M.K.Bhatnagar,pg 80-81)

A.K.Ramanujan a shining personality in the realm of modern Indian English poems had passed away in the year 1939 due to a reaction to anesthesia which was applied to him during an operation.

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