

AN IMAGERY POETRY RAMANUJAN

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An image in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan is often an adventure leading the reader into unsuspected avenues of experience. His imagery is noted for its correctness and power. This poet who spent the best part of his life in the United States of America has a singular ability to provide a very strong Indian physical context to the thoughts his poetry conveys. His imagery has a wide range – objects in Nature, colours, light and darkness, animals, the human body, the city life, legends and fairy tales – all fall within the range of his imagery. All these images are drawn with exceptional care and competence. C.Paul verghere underlines an important aspect of Ramanujan's imagery when he says that the poet images are "highly concentrated in the effect."¹ 'The Striders' is a poem typical of Ramanujan's concrete imagery. It is a poem about a water insect, which is called 'strider' in New England. The poet blends images of the sky and water with those of the body with great skill.

*And search
for certain thin-
stemmed, bubble eyed water bugs.
See them perch
on dry capillary legs
weighthers
on the ripple skin
of a steam.
No, not only prophets
walk on water. This bug sits
on a landslide of lights
and drowns eye-
deep
to its tiny strip
of sky.²*

In the first movement of the poem, the two adjectives for the water bugs are "thin-stemmed" and "bubble-eyed". Stem brings to the mind the image of a tree or plant while bubble suggests water. The suggestion that there bugs are found near water and possibly there are stems (of reed or other kinds of grass) too in the picture. But the poet is describing living things and not water or stems and so in the next line the adjectival for the legs are "capillary" suggesting a living body. There capillaries, however, are not full of blood: they are brown or translucent and hence 'dry'. The image related to the living body continues and it becomes a metaphor for the surface of the strum. The surface of the strum is called "ripple skin", suggesting the living insect.

The second movement of the poem brings in a reference to the prophets who were known to walk on water. The strider too can walk on water. The parallel between the water bug and prophets introduces an element of mystery. The poet suggests that the bug's ability to float on water is something of mystery about it when the idea of floating effortlessly has been established; the poet suggests light and depth of the water. The bug is seen sitting on "a landslide of lights". Suggesting simultaneously the lights playing on the rippling waters and the mountains with which the word landslide is associated. The concluding lines of the poem bring in the finding through the farmers' feet.

*Black largnettes are etched on their hoods,
Ridiulous, alien like some terrible asset
a crert among tiles and scales
that moult with the darkening half
of every moon (p.4).*

The herring of the snake is transferred to the rising twirl of dust on "slow-noon" roads on which the farmers walk. It brings to the reader the image of snake-charmers displaying their hooded cobras on the side of dusty roads on hot days.

The image suggested in the second movement of the poem is detailed further in the following movement. We are given the image of a "basketful of ritual cobras" that comes into the "tame little house." They are left on the floor to crawl:

*Their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples
They link the room with their bodies, curves
uncurling writing a sibilant alphabet of pail
on my flour (p.4).*

In the phrase "a sibilant alphabet of panic" we have a sense not only of the S-shape of the snake but also of the sibilant sound itself suggesting the hiring of the snake. The panic is both the snakes and those who watch them, particularly the poet as a child. This becomes evident when the speaker's mother is mentioned. She "gives them milk/in savers" and watches them suck it. The child is scared:

*The snakeman wreaths their writhing
Round his neck
For father's smiling
Money. But I scream (p. 5).*

The image of the snake is intertwined with memories of the poet's childhood. Everything is seen in the shape of a snake even the braids of his sister:

*Sister ties her braids
With a knot of tassel
But the weave of her knee-long braid has scales,
Their gleaned held by a scare of clean new pins (p. 5).*

The image of the snake is closely linked with violent death. This is the death of the snake that is struck by a "clickshod heel" making the "green while" of the snake's belly turn looking like "a water-bleached lotus stalk/plucked by a landman's hand." The sight of the snake's body fills the child's with a sense of panic. The poem ends with the image of the snake lying like a "sausage rope" when flies in the sun "will mob the look in his eyes."

Ramanujan's poem about snakes offers elements of comparability with Keki N.Daruwalla's 'Haranag' that too describes the killing of a snake:

*The stick came down in repetitive rage
on a shimmering dance of coils
and his innards lay scattered on the floor*"³

The essential difference between the two poems is that in Ramanujan's poem the child's point of view has been used in which there is a combination of fear and fascination whereas Daruwalla has introduced sexual imagery and a mysterious sense of a fascination. The snake was killed by the man in the bathroom in the presence of his naked wife who had been bathing when the snake was seen. The element of superstition is more prominently suggested in Daruwalla's poem:

*At night She said, 'we must make amends
and offer milk and grain again.
I agreed and started pouring
a most pungent eye-drop
and found her eye-ball scuttling north
into the forest of the upraised lid
leaving behind a white-desert eye,
and again I found her trembling
like a trapped bird
failing a serpent hood.*⁴

What a common, however, in the two-poems is the powerful imagery that the poets have used Ramanujan has used the image of a snake a number of times. Whenever such imagery is used it suggests fear, mystery and a certain kind of fascination. It can also suggest violence as in his poem 'Breaded Fish'. The poet is eating bread when the memory of a dead woman "dead/on the beach in a yard of cloth" (p.7) comes to him:

*Specially for me, she had some breaded
fish; even thrust a blunt-headed
smelt into my mouth;
and looked hurt when I could
neither sit nor eat, as a hood
of memory like a coil on a heath
opened in my eyes (p. 7)*

Similarly in 'A leaky Tap After a Sister's Wedding' too, there is a very telling image of a snake that concludes the poem:

*My sister and I have always wished a tree
could shriek on at least writhe
like the other snake
we saw
under the beak
of a crow (p. 10).*

In 'Anxiety' the feeling of fear is evoked with the help of a number of images the most prominent among them being those of fire, water and the snake. Anxiety is not "branchless as the

fear tree” but it has ‘naked root and secret thighs’ (p. 29). The feeling has “loose ends” with a “knot at the top” that “is me”. Later we come across the image of a snake and flowing waters.

Not wakeful in its white-snake

Glassy ways like the eloping gaiety of waters,

It dowers, viscous and floored as pitch (p. 29).

References:

1. Verghere, C. Paul, Problems of the Indian Creative writer in English, 1971.
2. Ramanujan, A.K., ‘The striders’, The collected poems of A.K. Ramanujan, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 3.
(All other references to Ramanujan’s poems are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically in the essay).
3. Daruwalla, Keki N., ‘Haranag’, Crossing of Rivers, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 54.
4. Ibid., p. 55.

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