



## IRONY AND SATIRE IN A. K. RAMANUJAN'S POEM "A RIVER": A PARALLEL STUDY WITH T.S. ELIOT AND HEIDEGGER'S VIEWS ON RIVER

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### ABSTRACT

The poem "A River" by A.K. Ramanujan, a prolific Indian poet in English draws attention by the unconventional presentation of the theme and makes a commentary on rivers, poets and human beings with a realistic look. It deviates from the conventional river-poetry that finds always the river as a source of inspiration to write without having an eye to the other aspects associated with the river. The minute details about the river in the summer as well as when it is flooded, should not be overlooked in poetry as in both stages the river is intimately related to the human beings – be it the flow of the narrow stream being thwarted by the woman's hair or a pregnant woman drowned with identical twins. The poet's attitude to the river can also be compared with the realism found in Eliot's poetry especially in *The Waste Land* that takes into account the two rivers - Thames and Ganga. The poem has also enough substance to be related with the German philosopher Heidegger's modern views on rivers and poets.

Keywords: river-poetry, unconventional, realism, Eliot, Heidegger

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Though an expatriate Indian living in U.S.A Ramanujan has his roots in the Indian climate and situation and so he invariably harks back to traditional Indian locales and themes in his poetry. "A River" is primarily a poem on a river probably Vaikai which flows through Madurai, a city that has been seat of Tamil culture and learning. But what distinguishes it from the Indian tradition of river – poetry is that Ramanujan makes a daring effort to penetrate beyond the veil of illusion and unfold the grim truth of devastation and loss caused by the river when it floods. The poem is a scathing attack on the relative attitudes of the old and new poets both of whom are exposed for their indifference and callousness. His concerns are mainly human: he derides the poets who live in 'ivory towers' cut off from life and reality.

Ramanujan's pungent irony is powerfully operative from the very opening sentence of the poem. Madurai, the poet observes, is a city of temples and poets and the poets here always sing of "cities and temples". The obvious ironic suggestion is that the poets are indifferent to the human beings and their sufferings. The poem after the initial ironic dig, presents the river pictorially during summer. The poet graphically describes how in every summer the river is reduced to a narrow stream and how its water cannot pass through the watergates because of the piles of the straw and woman's hair that obstruct its flow. The impression of the stones in the river has been successfully conveyed to us by precise images:

the wet stones glistening like sleepy  
crocodiles, the dry ones

shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun  
(13-15)

The next line bears the keynote of the poem: "The poets only sang of the floods"(16). Ramanujan's satire is here directed to those old and new poets who are only romantically obsessed and inspired by the sight of the flooded river, but are quite indifferent to the innocent victims of the flood.

The poet's intended satire towards the conventional attitude to a flooded river as a source of romantic inspiration brings the poem closer to T. S. Eliot's attitude in *The Waste Land* where he gives an ironic description of the rivers of both West and East – the river Thames in London and Indian Ganga. About Thames he comments "The River sweats/ Oil and tar/the barges drift/ With the turning tide/ Red sails/wide" (266-271) while in the next section he says, "Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves/Waited for rain, while the black clouds/Gathered far distant, over Himavant" ( 396-398). Ramanujan's poem also attains the grandeur of stark realism through the presentation of some realistic images associated with the river during the dry summer. His approach in the poem is not only to depict realism but to enhance and emphasize the inherent humanism that is intimately linked with that realism.

Ramanujan's ironic hit reaches its height when he introduces a third person observer who has visited the village during a flood. He records the response of the people to the flood. The people talked about the number of inches the water had risen by, the number of steps submerged by the water and the number of houses carried away by the flood. They also chatted how the flooded river washed away "one pregnant woman/ and a couple of cows named Gopi and Brinda as usual"(25-27). The phrase 'as usual' is tinged with irony. The callous attitude of the people to look at the flood has been sharply criticized. The image of the pregnant woman is significant for it involves two generations, the present and the future.

In the next passage the poet comes heavily on the new poets who blindly follow the old poets glorifying the river and the flood. No one of them wrote anything:

in verse  
of the pregnant woman  
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,  
kicking at blank walls  
even before birth (30-34)

Ramanujan's satirical dig here is the sterility of the new Tamil poets who "still quoted/ the old poets" (28-29). Such poets imitate the matter and the manner of the of the old poets and the futile stereotype of poetry continues. Such poets lack not only the realism that the true poets aspire to, but also the creative invention that Sidney speaks of in *Astrophel and Stella*.

The last passage sums up the earlier passages. In order to reiterate the loss the poet repeats a few lines of the preceding passage. The focus of the modern poet is on the human element – the tragic loss of human life and potential – iconized by the pregnant woman presumably carrying two identical twins, drowned in the flood. But the tinge of irony is unmistakable when Ramanujan refers to the visitor's regret:

the river has water enough  
to be poetic  
about only once a year (36-38)

The man perhaps be happier if the river flooded its banks frequently. Such callousness and inhumanity is undesirable and unacceptable to the genre of poetry and to the mankind.

Technically speaking, "A River" is written in clear and lucid style with vivid and picturesque description and precisely suggestive images. The contrast between the dry river and the flooded river is pictorially presented. The images of the bare 'sand ribs', 'straw and woman's hair', 'patches of repair', the wet stones looking like 'sleepy crocodiles' and the dry ones resembling the 'shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun' serve to enhance the realistic effect of the poem. The images of pregnant woman and identical twins are full of significant suggestions. Like most other Indo-Anglican poems, "A River" is irregular form, consists of lines of varying lengths and having no rhyme. It makes the poem look unconventional and strikes a note of novelty and innovation.

Ramanujan's poem can also be analysed in relation to Heidegger's views on river in his famous

lecture on *Holderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*. In his lecture Heidegger refers to a poem by Friedrich Holderlin that addresses an ancient holy river. Heidegger observes that it was clear that "the river comes to language" in Holderlin's poetry. On one hand the rivers are detached from human beings having their own "spirit" while on the other hand rivers form a locale in which human beings find a dwelling place. So there is an eternal conflict that brings into light the poetic essence of the river. He observes that river is something in between as when it takes its journey backward to its source – the mountains, the dwelling place of gods to the coming future when it meets with sea of oblivion while it traverses through a living presence making a strong relationship with the mortals. Heidegger takes a consideration of the rivers as a dwelling place for human beings. He considers some lines from Holderlin's poem in which the rivers are referred as "vanishing" and "full of intimation". The river, according to him is the "journeying of becoming homely" or rather the very locality of the human dwelling as historical upon the earth. But there must be a poet who poeticizes the essence of the river. The river poetry never overlooks its source from which it has been issued and then flowing forward. What it says is the sacred that not only transcend but determines the gods. The poet and the river stand between the human beings and the gods – perhaps they are demigods. The poetic motif of the river is not merely a symbol of constant flux; it is not the image that symbolizes something, rather it is an exemplification of becoming-in-the-midst-of-flux. Heidegger warns to consider river as the symbol of time and space as the river embodies a place within itself and the river itself dwells. Instead he favours the identification of the river with the poet himself. The rivers are the poets who establish a poetic basis upon which the human being dwells. The sign, the river, the demigod, the poet – all help to found the basis of historical human beings of becoming homely. The river is thus an enigma but to Heidegger the enigma doesn't mean that human beings should strive to resolve that enigma. Rather it brings the human beings closer as a puzzle. He says that poetry must be understood in something other than calculative, mechanical way.

Ramanujan's poem from the very beginning also emphasizes "city of temples and poets/who sang of cities and temples"(2-3). The river is traditionally associated with temples, the abode of gods and it remains a source of inspiration for the poets through all ages – the old and the new. But the problem in Ramanujan lies in the fact that the poetic treatment to the river by the old and the new poets is weak, lacking and one-sided as "The poets only sang of the floods"(16). The traditional river-poetry of Madurai is missing the depth and its relations with other living entities. Rather it has become imitative, mechanical and indifferent to human beings that dwell nearby. This callousness is the result of a failure of the poets to identify themselves with the river in depicting the complete panorama through their poems. Ramanujan brings into notice how the Tamil poets of both old and new generations have failed to present the realistic facts related to the river when it is almost dried up in summer as well as when it is flooded. To Ramanujan, a true poet instead of eulogising the flooded river romantically, should establish a strong attachment to the human beings who are mere victims of the flood. Therefore the poets during the flood instead of describing the number of inches of the water level risen by or the number of "cobbled steps" submerged by the water or the number of houses carried off by the flooded river, should discuss in their verses of the pregnant woman drowned with two identical twins in her womb and the couple of cows called Gopi and Brinda. Ramanujan in the spirit of a true poet can contemplate how it might be difficult to differentiate the identical twins after their birth as their bodies are without any identification mark like black moles and so the only way to "tell them apart" is by using "different coloured diapers".

Thus Ramanujan's poetry is remarkable in understanding the poet's realistic attitude and approaches that come closer to his later views expressed in his famous essay "Is There an Indian way of Thinking?" Though he never gives a definite answer whether a particular Indian way of thinking exists or not, he tells rather that a single Indian way of thinking never exists as an Indian way of thinking is always shaped by the diversities and differences it

celebrates. The notion of India is never unidirectional as it is perceived at different stages by different people and from different perspectives. Like a typical Indian poem "A River" enjoys and celebrates the multiplicity associated with the river instead of the blind adherence to the traditional river-poetry. Here the river is identified with the poet and endowed with a consciousness that can feel for the suffering human beings. The poet's concern in the poem is utterly humane that binds other multiple perspectives together and thereby presenting successfully a whole picture of the poetic essence of a river and of the human beings dwelling in its close proximity.

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