



THE TEXT THAT IS HEARD: A SCRUTINY OF THE PHONETIC INGENUITY OF A. K. RAMANUJAN

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ABSTRACT

A poem conceals lot more than what it reveals and it bears the most efficient and gracefully sensitive use of language. Phonology is the study of sound systems and the multiplicity of meanings in a text represented through ingenuity in the application of sound patterns. Peter Roach (2000) described phonology as the way “phonemes function in language and the relationship among the different phonemes”ⁱ. Phonology explains the patterns in which speech sounds are ordered in English into a scheme. Phonology basically deals with the sound patterns, the rhyming scheme and pronunciation of words in the sentence. Rhyme elements, alliteration, consonance and assonance are some of the phonological devices a poet applies to bring in various layers of meaning in his verse. This paper is a close scrutiny of the phonological devices appropriated by A. K. Ramanujan in his poetry that render them replete with lucidity and vivacity

Keywords: Assonance, Consonance, Euphony, Cacophony, Onomatopoeia

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INTRODUCTION

A.K. Ramanujan was a versatile poetic genius. He is one of the greatest creative talents who have left indelible footprints in Indian poetry in English. He is a conscious craftsman of language. The exactitude and aptness in his choice of sound patterns establishes him as a poetic craftsman par excellence. He makes use of all the phonological sources to impart a unique sensory appeal to his language, and to ensure that his poems are not just read but are heard. R. Parthasarathy rightly finds his language to be ‘rapier sharp’ and having a ‘glass like quality’ⁱⁱ.

DISCUSSION

A phonological examination of Ramanujan’s work reveals that he is a master at creating outstanding auditory images. In his work we frequently come across words or phrases that are

clustered or juxtaposed so ingeniously that they create distinctive effects when we read/hear them. This arrangement creates the sounds that strike us as amusing and enjoyable; even soothing at times. There are various deliberate arrangements of words that create special phonological effects. The best part of this arrangement is the coordination of the sound and thematic tone. We find abundant examples of Alliteration, Assonance and Consonance in Ramanujan’s poetry. He aptly uses Euphonic or Cacophonous effects with the changing mood and context of the poem. There are examples where he begins a poem with a pleasant sound pattern and suddenly towards the end changes it into a harsh cacophony with the demand of the context.

The poem ‘Snakes’, for example, presents a unique picture of the poet’s changing feelings

through its phonological effects from soft to harsh and to soft again. When he talks of mother, there is a pleasing repetition of the sound /m/ but when he turns to the snakes there is use of harsh sibilants /s/ and /r/ sounds.

..... Mother gives them milk (/m/)
in saucers. She watches them suck (/s/)
The snakeman wreaths their writhing (/r/)
round his neck
The clickshod heel suddenly strikes (/k/)
and slushes on a snake: I see him turnⁱⁱⁱ (/s/)

Similarly the poem 'A Minor Sacrifice' bears examples of cacophonous alliterations that depict the children's repentance at their sense of the sin of killing the grasshoppers nastily.

to scrub and scour with coconut fibre
till the skins of our palms come off^{iv}

There are some other examples where Ramanujan employs consonance, especially in the last consonant sound of words. This imparts some of the poems with a lyrical feel.

- I burned and burned. But one day I turned (/b/, /d/)
and caught that thought (/t/)
- I shook a little
and took her, behind the laws of my land.^v (/k/, /l/)

The consonance in the above lines occurs with a repetition of the plosive sounds /b/, /d/, /t/ and /k/. These sounds reverberate in the rebellion tone of the poem wherein the poet expresses his defiance against some of the stagnant orthodox ideologies of his native land.

Ramanujan creates outstanding auditory effects with the help of a whole host of devices. Onomatopoeia is one such device that he uses to optimize the auditory sensing of the readers. Onomatopoeia refers to the use of words that replicate the sounds associated with the things or actions they refer to. With this aid, the reader enters the world created by the poet. The use of onomatopoeia is another subtle weapon in the poet's arsenal for the transfer of sense impressions through imagery. The beauty of onomatopoeia lies in the fact that it has an effect on the reader's senses whether he understands the words or not. Moreover, a simple plain expression does not have

the same emphatic effect that conveys an idea powerfully to the readers. The use of onomatopoeic words helps create emphasis. Ramanujan has, though not frequently, used this phonological device to bring home his desired effects. He often creates a sound effect by mimicking the object described, thus making the description more expressive and interesting. Some of the examples are:

- It is a single summer woodpecker peck-peck-Peck-pecking away^{vi}
- making shadow-plays of rajas and cats, hissing,^{vii}
- Grandmother then, tut-tutting like a lizard^{viii}
- He couldn't lift his chipped blue enamel mug to his lips and slurp his tea any more....^{ix}

Repetition, the other phonological device, is the purposeful re-use of words and phrases for a special effect. Apart from being stylistically alluring it also helps express the message in far more appealing and remarkable manner. The sensation created by the usage of repetition is unique and cannot be accomplished via any other rhetorical device. It enhances the beauty of a sentence and stresses on the point of main significance. Repetition makes use of word associations to express the ideas and emotions and readers have to decipher such associations and understand the underlying meanings in order to enjoy the beauty. Ramanujan employs this phonological device to impart a conversational tone to his poems and to emphasize his themes.

There are also superb examples of diacope in Ramanujan's poetry. Diacope is the intermittent repetition of a word broken by some other words. At every repetition the word has some new element to add to the cognition process of the reader. It either emphasizes the image, or gives the reader a new angle to look at it, or intensifies the emotional element embedded in the poem. This not only amuses the reader, but also foregrounds the thought. An example can be cited from the poem 'A Rather Foolish Sentiment said of course to a girl sometime ago':

and wondered like a fool
who has no sense of body

if it were yours or mine,
and wondered if you wondered too.^x

The word 'wondered' has been sporadically repeated to facilitate the oblique expression of the shock that the protagonist experiences at the realization of the corporal pleasure after a casual passing touch of a woman.

Ramanujan's poetry carries instances of Epanalepsis too i.e. repetition of same word at the opening and end of a sentence. The poem 'It Does not Follow, but When in the Street' presents a good example:

yellow trees bend over broken glass
and the walls of Central Jail
drip with spring's laburnum
yellows, yellow on yellow^{xi}

The stanza starts with the word 'yellow' and ends with the same sound. The repetition emphasizes the connotative meaning and the closing sound of the same word intensifies the obliqueness. On one hand yellow stands for freshness, happiness, positivity, clarity, energy, optimism, enlightenment, remembrance, intellect, honor, loyalty, and joy, but on the other, it represents cowardice and deceit. Sometimes it also represents caution, sickness, and jealousy. The opening 'yellow' is for the freshness and joy of spring season, whereas the last 'yellow' is for the fraudulence of the criminals and the depressing environment of the jail.

Ramanujan employs epimone very skillfully. He has at quite a number of places repeated the entire phrase to stress a point in his poems. This device has really met its purpose by making the reader feel from the perspective it was designed with. For example the poem *The Opposable Thumb* the poet repeats the following lines to intensify the theme of the domestic violence inflicted upon his granny whose fingers were chopped by her husband in a fit of rage:

- 'One two three four five
five fingers to a hand'
said the.....
but
under the usual casual opposable
thumb.
One two three four five
five fingerspans for a woman's blouse

said the.....
but.....
instead of the usual casual opposable
thumb.^{xii}

Every stanza of the poem has a repeated pattern, with a repetition of a fixed phrase 'One two three four five'. This heightens the end effect of connotation pertaining to the hand deformities, with a repeated reference to the general counting process done on fingers. There are recurrent examples of epimone one would come across while reading Ramanujan:

how can I say farewell
when farewells are made
only for people who stay
and only for people
who go away?^{xiii}

The other form of repetition one would find in Ramanujan's work is polyptoton. It is the repetition of words of the same root with different endings. This device is adroitly exploited by Ramanujan in his poems, wherever he has to create the sensual images:

- but only the passing touch
of people whom I once touched
in passing when they let me
pass. Perhaps it will not pass,
for in that touch I think I stumbled
on a pulse, and wondered like a fool
.....
And wondered if you wondered too.^{xiv}

The entire poem has been written using three verbs – 'touch', 'pass' and 'wonder' repeatedly, each time in different verb-endings. The choice of these verbs and their repetition emphasizes the motif of the narrator's gradual realization of the sensual pleasure drawn via a casual touch while passing by the opposite sex. Some other brilliant examples to cite are:

- meeting before I begin to see,
seeing after I have done
with meeting.^{xv}
- we had never known
we would ever know,
my wife's syriac face,
chosen of all faces....^{xvi}

CONCLUSION

A scrutiny into the vast assortment of phonological devices that Ramanujan has employed establishes the linguistic brilliance of the poet. His images are so vivid and replete with sensory appeal that we do not just read them: we can touch them, taste them, smell them, see them and hear them. And when we hear them, the sounds are so explicit that we not only hear the sounds, but the emotions, moods and also the intentions of the sources.

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- ^{vii} *Ibid* p. 121
- ^{viii} *Ibid*p. 145
- ^{ix} *Ibid* p. 154
- ^x *Ibid* p. 18
- ^{xi} *Ibid* p. 57
- ^{xii} *Ibid* p. 6
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