



ASSIMILATION OF THE TRADITIONAL EAST AND THE MODERN WEST: AN ANALYSIS OF A.K. RAMANUJAN'S POETRY

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Abstract

Writings of the diaspora occupy an important place in Indian literature. It provides a conceptual framework and defines positions where a new identity is constructed that negotiates the limits and concerns of various metaphors of time and space. The diasporic writers' most profound sympathies and attachments are to their country and they view India as their true home. India, its culture and people have been shown by these Indian writings in English. A representative of Indian English poetry, A.K Ramanujan is a prominent voice of the Indian Diaspora. His poems exhibit an Indian and western mind, where he stresses the need to incorporate the practical and meaningful aspects of tradition into modernity. His sensitivities are rooted in his Indian inheritance, but he evidently has a modernist vision. The poems of Ramanujan reflect upon the transcendental essence of traditional Hindu meditations, his memories, the sentimental nostalgia, the appeal of mythical and archetypal symbols, and his sense of belongingness to his native homeland. This paper aims to analyse how he synthesizes the diverse cross-cultural confrontation between the traditional east and the modern west in his poetry.

Keywords: A.K. Ramanujan, Modernity, Tradition, Diaspora, Hybridity

Among the most influential among the modern Indian poets who wrote in the modernist post-independence phase is A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993.) He is bilingual, having written both in his native Kannada and English. A volume of his poetry, titled *Selected Poems*, was released by the Oxford University Press in 1976. He was awarded the Padma Shri Award in 1976 and was also elected Fellow of the American Academy of Fine Arts and Sciences. A.K Ramanujan's poetry shows both a command of diction and a voice of authenticity. Ramanujan doesn't indulge in mere philosophical presentation or partake in socio-political notions; his art represents an unusual sensitivity to life reality. Furthermore, his poems present the intercultural experience of the synthesis between

the east and the west. His collections *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971) and *Second Sight* (1987) illustrate his expanding horizons with an increasing understanding of the self. His fame rests not only a reputable poet, but also an internationally renowned translator. His translations of the classics of Tamil and Kannada reflect beauty and elegance and approach the originals most closely via their subtle evoking.

Ramanujan is among the writers of the Indian diaspora during the last decade who have been on centre stage, mainly due to the theoretical formulations created by their work and increasing contribution to cultural studies. Their writing raises questions about what it means to be at home and how we define our identities. Likewise, Ramanujan's

poetry stems from his simultaneous devotion to two separate modes of interpretation—the traditional and the unavoidable modern. He acknowledges the influence of traditional Tamil and Kannada poetry from the Middle Ages on his poetic mind and language. His poetry is turned into an arena where the need to connect to history through tradition clashes with contemporary truth and immediacy. In his poetry, family life, rural India, culture, and its superstitions, the landscape of India serves as subjects. He looks at the gradual decline of an old tradition and recognizes the manner the modern society is still attempting to hold on to. The main focus of his creativity is on the decline of his own tradition. At the same time, there is a struggle for self, cultural identity, personal relationships with regard to existential issues of who we are and where we come from.

He received his legacy of traditional and modern thinking from his father. His mother gave him a good sense of cultural identity and local community. The house of Ramanujan in Mysore is an important part in the personal landscape of the poet. It is a vibrant place with numerous streams of languages and perspectives. His father lived on the second floor of the building, and if he went upstairs, he would converse with him in English. He would converse in Tamil with his mother in the kitchen and in Kannada outside on the streets, which is why he identified English as the upstairs language and Tamil and Kannada as the downstairs languages. In the words of Ramanujan,

English and my discipline (Linguistics and Anthropology) give me my outer forms - 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. They are continuous with each other and I no longer can tell what comes from where. (Parathasarathy 95)

The difficulty of most Indo-English poets is said to be the vulnerability of language alienation from English as an innovative expressive medium. As Raja Rao says, "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own. One has to convey the various shades and missions of certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language" (vi). However, as K.R.S. Iyengar puts,

"what makes Indo-English 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" (Mohan xvii).

Ramanujan certainly is a subject of ethnic ambivalence and cultural complexities, yet he did not naturalise western themes and customs like the Indian ones. His "Indianness" is an enticing source of charm for him as it has been striking and powerful. This special sense of expression of A.K. Ramanujan makes him an influential voice among his contemporaries. He is rooted in Indian territory, Indian culture, rituals, myths and traditions. The poetry of Ramanujan represents a touch of Indian ethos and his English poetry is cultural, literary and assimilates Indian cultural characteristics. For example, in his "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" he engages the Western paradigm in an allegedly Indian existence. He combines the styles of India and Europe in new ways and handles, adapts and assimilates other beliefs and cultures without losing consciousness of being an Indian. Bruce King says: "He showed that Indian poets could both be modern and work from within their own literary traditions" (Modern Indian Poetry in English 36).

In his English-language poetry, he uses a variety of styles and incorporates linguistic, literary, and cultural characteristics from Kannada and Tamil into English literature (King "Three Indian" 102). Bruce King remarks,

Indian expatriate poets do not write from the position of a distinct foreign community, such as the exiled black or West Indian novelists, but their writing reflects the perspective of

someone between two cultures. They may look back on India with nostalgia, satirically celebrating their liberation or asserting their biculturalism, but they also look sceptically and wryly on their new home land as outsiders, with a feeling of something having been lost in the process of growth ("Modern" 231).

Ramanujan is a representative of a new kind of poetry that emerged in English in the mid-20th century by poets like Parthasarathy, Kolatkar, Kamala Das that studied the foundations of their own society and culture and made social and religious reforms. In sensitivity and content, it was Indian, but its language was English. This mode of expression wherein writing of these Indian writers had its roots and its stems in the Indian environment, but in the English language is as a type of hybridity. Homi Bhabha in his *Location of Culture* introduced the 'hybridity' concept to describe the culture and identity construction under colonial power structures and inequality. Hybridity is, for him, the mechanism by which the colonial government undertakes to transform the colonised identity into a singular one (the other) into a universal structure, but doesn't often develop familiar aspects. According to him, Hybridity is the intermediate space between where hegemonic colonial cultural narratives are disrupted and displaced. This intermediate space is also called the 'third space'. There are several modes of hybridization: linguistic, culture, political, ethnic, etc. Hybridity represents an "intermediate" state of a human being between two cultures in literary contexts. One of the challenges of postcolonial literature, especially for writers living in foreign lands, is figuring out how to integrate and articulate the various cultural influences on a writer in other ways than a solely thematic approach. Although some authors have taken over, post-modernism's open forms allow for the juxtaposition of opposing concepts, passages influenced by various languages and cultures. Ramanujan's poetry is an example of a more refined, elegant, and profound style of writing with multi-cultural aspects.

As an expatriate, Ramanujan has used his experience to confront the ideals of the motherland,

India, and the United States of America. His poetry gives us intricate descriptions of childhood memories and events and focuses on the emotional experiences of people in Indian and Western societies. He tries to look back to the westernised culture and establish their lost identity and negotiates various boundaries of time and space by employing various approaches. Ramanujan lived at the crossroads of two worlds – his inner and intimate world of which lied in the memories of his memories in India and the new identity and outlook of the outside world of his residence.

The poems of Ramanujan are full of Indian contexts, myths and, at the same time, significantly depict contemporary ideas, foreign travel and rapid cultural transformations. He addressed Indianness through memories of his native country and home. For him, the house is a microcosm of the whole culture. A definite and permanent space, it contains timeless traditions. In his poem, his "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House", he recounts events which are fragments in his memory.

"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" (Collected Poems 96)

These lines also represent that Indian culture has accommodated foreign elements into its internal structure. The house that is repository of culture has a psychological hold. In the words of Akshaya Kumar, for Ramanujan the house is a "cultural junkyard" which stands for "abstention as well as inescapable participation in life" (78).

Another important observation from his poems is that Ramanujan is enchanted and pulled back to his motherland. Whenever he finds himself unable to return to his domestic roots, he works to detach himself from it through his poetry. In his "Looking for the Centre",

"Suddenly, connections severed as in a
lobotomy, unburdened of history, I lose my
bearings,

a circus zilla spun at the end of her rope, dizzy terrified and happy. And my watchers watch, cool as fires in a mirror" (Collected Poems, 185).

Ramanujan also performs the role of a social critic by bringing out the social problems of his motherland, India, through his poetry. He felt concerned for the poor, and the miserable plight of the beggars. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar 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 denizens of Dante's hell (671).

Another important theme of Ramanujan's poetry is alienation. Ramanujan after travelling abroad, feels alienated from his family and faces a sense of rootlessness. He must start a new life and start in a new setting to adjust to the western society. This is represented through the following lines from the poem "Not Knowing",

"not knowing who I am or what
I want I roam the city walk into movies
hurtle down a roller coaster" (Collected Poems 216).

Along with his turn to his roots, Ramanujan was also inspired by Modern English poetry movements such as imagism, symbolism, and surrealism. Most modern poets recognise the importance of irony and paradox in poetry, as emphasised by the New Critics, and Ramanujan makes extensive use of these devices. Simultaneously, the influence of various Indian traditions in his poetry cannot be overlooked. In addition, many of the modern stylistic techniques, such as word economy and image exactness can be found in Ramanujan's translations of mediaeval and bhakti poetry of Tamil and Kannada regional poets. Bruce King comments,

"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" ("Modern English" 116).

The use of the English language by Ramanujan is typical of a modern poet. However, since he is not a native English speaker, his choice of English as the medium for his poems poses the same inquiry that all Indo-Anglican poets confront: Is it possible to express an authentic Indian spirit in a language that is not Indian? Is it possible for an Indian poet to articulate emotional and cultural complexities in English? Ramanujan appropriately and skilfully makes use of the English language when he writes of Indian folklore and mythology. In regards to this, he joins the esteemed league of Indian authors such as R.K. Narayan, Toru Dutt and Sri Aurobindo, Raja Rao, who have written in English about Indian legends, myths and folklore, and have rendered them as part of English literature as naturally as any Indian regional language.

Also, as an objective observer, he also criticises some societal traditions and superstitions. For instance, in his poem "The Opposable Thumb", he shows the ill treatment received by Indian women from their husbands,

"Just one finger left to five, a real thumb
no longer usual, casual, or opposable after
her husband's knifing temper one Sunday
morning half a century ago" (Collected Poems 4)

In a confluence between tradition and modernity, numerous changes emerge, but the essentials of mind do not change. The Hindu mind is the result of hundreds of years of conditioning. Ramanujan understands that his thought will always affect his individuality and temperament. The following lines of "Conventions of Despair", express his Hindu consciousness,

"The Hindu consciousness is pervasive.
I must seek and will find
My particular hell in my Hindu mind"
(Collected Poems 34)

The poem, "Snakes" shows his superstitious mother who reveres snakes. Snakes are considered as dangerous predators in western countries, while in India they are known for their mythological importance. The poem sheds light on one prominent festival, Nagpachami, in which the worshippers offer the snakes milk. By doing so, Ramanujan's poem illustrates Indian culture where animals are worshipped and revered.

"They lick the room with their bodies, curves uncurling, writing a sibilant alphabet of panic on my floor. Mother gives them milk in saucers. She watches them suck and bare the black-line design etched on the brass of the saucer (Collected Poems 6).

Likewise, he passes a commentary on Western traditions as well. He makes reference to the western modernity such as the justification for the liberty to devise a place for sexual impulses, the means of self-gratification through films and the insensitive quests of science. He criticises and condemns following the modern tendencies in order to become acceptable in the western society. He has no stigmas or reservations about recognising what he likes or condemning what he considers a disgrace to the integrity of man.

"Yes, I know all that. I should be modern. Marry again. See strippers at the Tease. ... Join the testban, or become The Outsider" (Collected Poems 34)

Through his poetry, Ramanujan brings together elements of tradition and modernity. Tradition and modernity sometimes compete but he emphasises the need to derive benefit from the assimilation of tradition and modernity. As Bruce King comments:

Often what seems modern European in Ramanujan's poetry has an Indian source. But rather than the reactionary re-vivalism or conservative traditionalism which attempts to bring back or continue an unaltered past, Ramanujan has in mind the kind of continuity that T. S. Eliot wrote about in 'Tradition and

the Individual Talent' which says that each new significant text added to a tradition will both alter and confirm that tradition. Although his poetry can be read on its own as modern English-language poetry and within a context of modern themes and forms, it is also rooted in Indian cultural traditions ("Three Indian" 10).

Like Bruce comments, for Ramanujan, the ethos of the Indian society is embodied in the Indian traditions which is embodied in his familial relationships and memories of his traditional home. The recollections evoked from days, places and people of the past enrich his creativity. In the words of Bruce King,

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. ("Three Indian" 8).

A.K Ramanujan's poetry reacts actively and naturally to Indian culture and customs inspite of the effects of modernity and comprises of inherent and distinctive "Indian" elements. Ramanujan's achievement is the appeal of his poetry to modern as well as traditional tastes and sensibilities. The cultural differences between East and West are not disconcerting for Ramanujan. He explored culture uncompromisingly and contrasted the various facets of the traditional Indian culture and values to the increasingly evolving trends of modern western values.

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