



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Indianness as the thematic explorations in the Poems *A River* and *Elements of Composition* by A. K. Ramanujan.

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VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Abstract

English Indian literature has always unfolded India, its culture and people in major of the works. These works always had a tone of yearning for one's homeland. India can be viewed displayed with all its hues and shadows, bright or dull. A.K. Ramanujan's poetry belongs to this tradition. His prestige is well engrained as a world's foremost folklorist, linguist, translator and a sagacious intellectual. And as a poet, he is not only a representative figure of the post-independent Indian English poetry, but also a seminal representative spokesman of the third world Diasporas.

This paper is an effort to vision how A. K. Ramanujan reconsiders his Indian past and presents it through his mighty words.

Keywords: Hinduism, Indian tradition and culture, ethos, modernity, culture, family

Indianness as the thematic explorations in the Poems *A River* and *Elements of Composition* by A. K. Ramanujan.

Indian Poetry in English is interesting not only in its theme but also in technique and style. In theme, it deals with the various aspects of human emotions and social behaviour. It beautifully delineates the patriotic zeal for breaking the shackles of slavery, the age-old tradition, rites, customs, mysticism and a theme of underlying unity amidst diversities. It also dwells upon the theme of spiritual bliss and harmony, a strong affinity to rootedness and a nostalgic touch to tradition and motherland which always nurse and nourish the sentiments of the poets in particular and the common rank and file in general. (Prasad 70)

A.K. Ramanujan, As a seminal representative figure of English poetry in modern India, has been always be commemorated as a poet endowed with a deviant poetic sensibility, gifted with a treasure trove of memories which the passage of time refused to fade. He stands out as a distinguished poet who has made a crucial position for himself in the sphere of Indian English poetry. As a proficient technical artist and as the one who maintained a perfect balance between the traditional and the modern, he is accredited for having kept his originality un mutilated despite being subjected to the onslaught of various influences both Indian and Western. Most of his poems, though intensely personal have a universal dimension of their own. The main themes of Ramanujan's poetry are family, love, despair, frustration, alienation, existentialism and death. They are full of irony, humour, paradox and sudden reversals. Two of his poems have been concerned here for the Indianness in relation to his thematic exploration.

In the poem *A River* Ramanujan has woven certain themes as being an arch follower of Hinduism and Indian sensitivity. *A River*, being a poignant poem, presents the current socio-political attitude realistically. It is noteworthy that Ramanujan simply writes as a detached observer, maintaining an attribute of complete insularism and not making any deliberate effort to touch or move his readers. Pathos is the central theme of this poem, but Ramanujan does not employ any particular device to arouse the pity of his readers. He merely communicates certain facts to the readers, letting the facts themselves produce the desired effect on them.



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Far from using any particular device to arouse feeling of pity in the hearts of the readers, he employs the weapon of irony against the poets who write poetry all right but who take no practical steps in the matter. Even so far as the poets are concerned, only the older ones dealt with the floods in their poems while the new poets have no room in their poetry to describe, or refer to, the havoc which the annual flood works. The new poets merely quote the old poets but do not mention the tragedies which occur during flood. There is more irony in the closing passage in which Ramanujan says that the river has water enough to urge a poet to write a poem about it, only casually mentioning the damage which the flood-waters cause in the very first half an hour. Here is a critical appreciation of this poem concerning with its thematic aspects.

Indifference to human sorrow and suffering

A. K. Ramanujan's poetry is like a mirror in which one can see the face of Indian tradition along with a host of other things. His poetry recognizes the vitality inherent in Indian tradition and culture, and also the changes which have taken place in the structure of Indian society. Ramanujan's subtle irony colours his glimpses into traditional ideas and rituals of Indian society. *A River* is a touching and poignant poem. Pathos is the key note of this poem. Ramanujan employs the weapon of irony against the poets who dealt with the floods in the poem but they did not describe the havoc which annual flood works. The poets did not mention the tragedies which occur during flood. It is Ramanujan who mentions the damage caused in the first half an hour,

Of the pregnant woman
Drown, with perhaps twins in her,
Kicking at blank walls
Even before birth (*A River*)



So the poets and people cared about their pleasure, profit and prosperity. They even don't care about the innocent souls, twins in the womb of a mother who is drowned in the flood. How can one expect the indifferent people to bother about,

..... carried off three village houses
.... And a couple of cows. (*A River*)

Ramanujan mentions even the names of the cows Gopi and Brinda. Thus in this poem, Ramanujan presents the current modern scenario of indifference and unconcern of the people with those endured the lost, damage, sorrow and suffering.

Satire to Debunk the Traditional Romantic view:

A literary artist is supposed to present the mirror picture of what he sees in the society and his surroundings. It is his moral obligation to reflect what is there in the society, the vices and virtues, truthfully. A. K. Ramanujan has tried to present the realistic picture of river Vaikai. He has not only presented the picture of river in summer as,

A river dries to a trickle,



In the sand.
Baring the sand ribs,
.....
The wet stones glistening like sleepy
Crocodiles, the dry ones
Shaven water – buffaloes lounging in the sun. (*A River*)

But the pain and suffering of the loss of anonymous mass due to floods in monsoon. The floods creates, not only human catastrophe but also affect the living and non-living stocks,

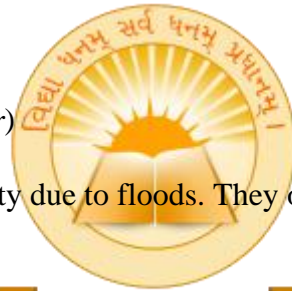
Three village houses,
A couple of cows
Named Gopi and Brinda
And one pregnant woman
Expecting identical twins (*A River*)

But the poets of Madurai, new and ancient, always talked about the aesthetic facet of the river. They neither thought about river in summer,

He was there for a day
When they had the floods. (*A River*)

Nor they thought about the loss of humanity due to floods. They only cared for,

The river has water enough
To be poetic
About only once a year (*A River*)



Thus, instead of presenting the truthful picture the ancient and modern poets cared for their own profit. Neither they cared for river nor they worry for the loss and pain that the people have suffered. They want to sing about the floods and the beauty of the flood in the river.

A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is not only the face of modern Indian society, culture and tradition, but it also navigates the horizons of the culture and society of other countries as well, which he juxtaposes with the Indian culture and tradition. Cultural preoccupation has always been an important feature of Ramanujan's poetry.

An attack on the Orthodoxy of Hinduism

As it is stated previously, Ramanujan satirizes the superstitions and orthodoxy prevailing in southern part of India. He presents the picture in *A River* which is against the humanism point of view.

In India, a river is considered as holy place. People worship the river as mother. It is quite natural to give adequate respect to the river that gives two of our three primary needs, air, water and food. But out of sheer



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ISSN 2454-8596

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blind belief, people cast off the relics of their ritualistic ceremony. Moreover they feel themselves secure of any gloom. Thus on one hand they worship river and on the other they pollute it with,

Straw and women's hair
Clogging the watergates (*A River*)

From realistic point of view also, there is the tinge of orthodoxy of Hinduism against universal humanism. The poets and the people or even the authorities in Madurai, they praise gather and observe the water increasing,

The poets only sang of the floods.
He was there for a day
When they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
Of the inches rising. (*A River*)

Thus, the poet sang only about the beauty of the river during flood, people gathered thrilled and marked the rising water at every inch. Even the authority, any of the three neither cared of cleanliness and purity of the river during dry time, nor they cared or thought even about the people or stock drawn during the flood. Abhinandan Malas rightly remarks,

It is interesting to note that not only Ramanujan has presented the Indian tradition and culture but has also pointed out the malpractices and corruption that have crept into it (This becomes so significant because of unprecedented attention political and bureaucratic corruption is receiving today.) In many of his poems Ramanujan has shown how the Hindu fails to follow the Hindu religion and misinterprets the religious teachings. (Malas 354)

Another characteristic of Ramanujan's poetry is his anti-sentimental approach to life, especially scientific method in his observation of life in general and personal experiences in particular. His poems scarcely reveal any sentiment bordering on tenderness. He can relate in a calm and detached manner any of the dismal realities of life. In the *Elements of Composition* he talks about the five basic elements, i.e. the earth, the fire, the wind, the water and the sky, that compose human body. There is a list of other odd elements from Chemistry which are innate in human body.

Existentialism

Existentialism is one of the major themes in Ramanujan's *The Elements of Composition*. The identity crisis in the poetry of Ramanujan escapes easy categorization. The writer who is born and brought up in the Hindu way of life and who has educated himself as a world citizen, the conflict between the inner and outer forms the core of his poetry. D. Ramakrishna remarks,

It will be more appropriate to say that while the Hindu or the Indian milieu constitute the 'inner' substance of Ramanujan's poetry, the Western milieu shapes the 'outer' substance, and the two co-exist. (Ramakrishna 13-14)



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As such Ramanujan's poetry follows the modernist concept of free verse, the new form of poetry without consideration of traditional rhyme and meters. The inner content consists of the Hindu philosophy and belief of body consists of five basic elements from the nature. Sumana Ghosh observes,

Ramanujan is neither a nostalgic traditionalist nor an advocate of modernisation and westernisation. He is a product of both and his poems reflect a personality conscious of change, enjoying its vitality, freedom and contradictions, but also aware of memories which form his inner self, memories of an unconscious 'namelessness', which are still alive, at the foundation of the self. (Ghosh 190)

In the beginning lines of the poem Ramanujan states of his ordinary existence.

Compose as I am, like others,
Of elements on certain well-known lists
Father's seed and mother's egg. (*The Elements of Composition*)

And then wonders about his confusion and chaos unlike others. His identity crisis and the suffocation are exposed,

Into a chattering self tangled
In love and work,
Scary dreams, capable of eyes that can see
Only by moving constantly,
The constancy of things (*The Elements of Composition*)



The motion, one of the core phenomenon of life is suddenly turned into 'stonehenge'.

Ramanujan splits the matter into two contradictory aspects of life. On one hand when he does not feel separated from others, on the other he feels 'tangled' into worldly activities, on one hand he feels life with moving eyes and moving objects, on the other he sees constancy, lifelessness in,

Lion faces, crabs for claws
Clotted on their shadows
Under the stone – eyed
Goddess of dance, mere pillars
Moving as nothing on earth (*The Elements of Composition*)

Reincarnation

Like many other cultures and traditions, Indian philosophy also believes in reincarnation of the soul. The Greek believed in the process of purgation of the soul for the rebirth, Egypt culture believes in preserving the body with a view of reincarnation of the soul and that need the body in that process.

Ramanujan begins the poem by stating a list of elements that compose the body. And describes the episodes



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of being moved with motionless,

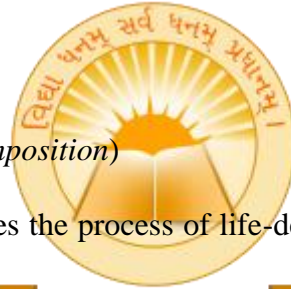
I pass through them
As they pass through me
Taking and leaving
Affection, seeds, skeletons (*The Elements of Composition*)

And the temporal existence of all the living being exit without having a single sign of their existence.

Millennia of fossil records
Of insects that do not last
A day
Body prints of mayflies (*The Elements of Composition*)

The body has to submit all elements to their originals. The fire, the earth, the sky, the water and the air acquires their portion when the soul is ready to move for the purgation process. The soul transforms

Into other names and forms
Past and passing, tenses
Without time
Caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
Being eaten. (*The Elements of Composition*)



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Thus reincarnation is a cycle that continues the process of life-death and rebirth, may be in another body at another place.

Family relationship

The family, for Ramanujan, is one of the central metaphors with which he thinks. Says Parthasarthy in his *The Poetry Encounter*. Ramanujan uses a distinct technique to describe his relationships. His family relations always haunt the poet, and there are many good poems which owe their origin to the recollected personal emotions. The poem deals with his relation and the ambiguous freedom that life confers. G. Somaseshu considers family and its relationships as native Indian tradition, feelings and ethos. According to him the archetypal theme of Ramanujan's poetry involves family and its relationships viewed from different angles. In these relations, we find nostalgia, pathos, iron, humour and sympathy. His poems reveal an assured identity of the poet with the family, which he very much needed after he settled down in Chicago. Thus linking of familial experience with history and tradition is a feature which runs through the poetry of Ramanujan.

In *The Element of Composition* also Ramanujan cannot resist including this theme. Ramanujan express his pathos in a ting of irony while stating about his existence due to, "Father's seed and mother's egg".

His ordinariness and alienation is expressed in the consequent lines. Reminding his childhood days when he played with his uncle's the shadow play he remembers,



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Add uncle's eleven fingers
Making shadow plays of raja
And cats, hissing,
Become fingers again. (*The Elements of Composition*)

He recollects the past memory of staying with combine family as an indispensable part of his existence as the follower of Hinduism. They were the days of wonder and fun. But soon the maturity appears and he understands the wordlessness. It is a matter of great suffering when he reminds of his sister,

..... The look
Of panic on sister's face
An hour before
Her wedding. (*The Elements of Composition*)

The pain and suffering of separation from the dear ones panic the poet along with another caotic experience that a friend has gone through. The havoc of mankind in the form of roits, may be communal, racial or political. The riots can anonymize the existence of a place, race or culture from the pages of history. The same fear is expressed here.

... a dated newspaper map,
Of a place one has never seen, may be
No longer there

After the riots, downtown Nairobi
That a friend carried in his passport
As others would (*The Elements of Composition*)



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Thus the irony of the line, here, in the person who should carry a woman's picture, is carrying map of a land which is no more now.

Thus, in *The Elements of Composition* also Ramanujan cannot refrain himself mentioning about his family and relations. He is more a nostalgic and pathetic about the conditions in which he has seen them.

To sum up, every great poet displays consummate technical skill and Ramanujan is no exception. He does credit to his muse by giving shape to his poetic art in the most estimable manner. He seems to find the exact word and expression to convey his feelings and thoughts. Moreover, he uses a wealth of poetic devices like simile, metaphor, alliteration, assonance, images and symbols and so on, thus reflecting his mastery over the art of creative writing.

What is so unique about Ramanujan is that there is not conscious expression of hybridity. The place is not important for him. He is more concerned in searching and finding the universality of the problems that exist in his poems. In his 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 be poet writing in his mother tongue.



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Though he writes in open forms, his verse is extremely, tightly constructed.

Ramanujan's craftsmanship as a genius is beyond any demarcation, Dulai infers,

His poetic self presents a unique amalgam of the traditional and the modern. If his sensibility is rooted in the Indian heritage, his vision is definitely that of a modernist's. His credit lies in his remarkable ability to maintain a considerable balance between tradition and modernity.

(Dulai 149-75)

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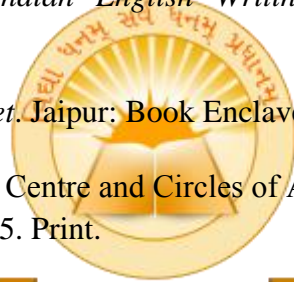
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