



ROLE OF 'FAMILY' AND 'REMINISCENCES' IN THE POETICAL WORKS OF A.K. RAMANUJAM: AN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

A.K. Ramanujam's poetry and his literary contributions are humanly connected to his childhood nostalgia and his native influence. Reminiscences blend with the theme and his poetic skills and have created masterpieces. His range of subjects is wide in its spectrum and deep in its dimension. This paper neatly explores how he depicts his childhood and early years through his poem and essays.

No doubt, A.K. Ramanujam occupies a significant place in the cosmos of Indo-Anglian poetry. Having won the name and fame all over the world after the publication of his two volumes of poetry – **The Striders** (1966) and **Relations** (1971), he established his position as “one of the most talented of the ‘new poets’”. In the words of William Walsh, he is “the most gifted poet”. Not only did he achieve recognition in Kannada and Tamil with his anthologies – **Hokkulalli Hoovilla** and **Kurunthohai** but also translated into English poetry in Tamil Nadu and Kannada in **The Interior Landscape** and **Speaking of Siva** respectively. Each and every piece of his literary output in Kannada and Tamil proclaimed a new epoch in vernacular literature. Reflecting on a touch of humanity, Indian ethos and pertinence of life, A.K. Ramanujam looks back at his personally known but irrationally woven strands of his life's journey clearly poeticizing the very reminiscences into neatly articulated strands of modern poetry.

A.K. Ramanujam's innate desire to liberate himself from the very strands of cultural heritage is very much felt when one goes through his autobiography, his poems, his essays and his literary translations. He generally depicts his childhood and early years in his family poems. The modern critic Ayyappa Paniker rightly refers to the confessional note in the poems about close relations, mother, father, grandfather, wife and children. He has out and out moulded his experiences involving his relations into poetic pieces and his insatiable urge to relieve his past imaginatively as an aesthetic manifestation of his search for family roots deserves considerable mention. It is the joint family and its intricate relations which receive due treatment in his poetry. The traditional Hindu joint family sustained for centuries the health of the society. Parthasarathy rightly observes, “The family is, for Ramanujan, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks”:

“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” (Small-scale Reflections)

Though joint families of urban middle-class have disintegrated, the basic structural relations have remained in tact. So, as Richard Lannoy puts it, “The ancestral home remains not merely a symbol, but the heart of a family's sense of identity”. By referring to his ancestral home, Ramanujan seems to suggest that a man cannot free himself totally from family as it means the loss of his identity. He carries it with him wherever he goes. Many of his poems either directly or indirectly refer to his family and relations. In ‘Snakes’ where he depicts his fear of snakes, the family figures. The books tacks with their geometry without curves; and the scaly braids of his sister remind him of snakes. Their memory, in turn, carries him back into the world of his childhood inhabited by his father, mother and sisters. Further, the black lorgnettes on the Cobra's hood appear to him “ridiculous, alien, like some terrible aunt”. The ugly sixty fingers in ‘The opposable Thumb’ reminds him of a ‘cousin’ waiting for a coin. Towards the end of the poem, the lighter mood gives place to sadness when the poet remembers his grandmother whose thumb is a victim of “her husband's knifing temper” (p.31)

Besides striving to make his images visually strong, Ramanujan also succeeds in depicting some auditory images. For instance, in ‘Leady Tap after a sister's wedding’, he draws the sound pictures. Each sound reminds him of the association it has with others and finally leads him to the extent that is associated with it. The sound of the water drops dripping from the leaky tap are first like ‘mallet touches’ of the silver smiths working for his sister's wedding, but a summer woodpecker pecking away at the tree. These various sounds are interrelated with the memories of the Chatty nature of his sisters and their marriage. Even in **The Striders**, where he describes minutely a water insect bearing, the same name, he subtly suggests his preoccupation with the family. He objectifies his predicament in that of the bug in the second stanza, through obliquely:



“..... Thus bug sits on a landslide of lights
and drowns eye-deep into
tiny strip of sky”.

The phrase ‘tiny strip of sky, in away’, represents Ramanujan’s private world of family which is small and crowded by his **Relations**. Thus, it can be seen that vivid images in Ramanujan often exhibit an organic relation with the principle of family. This is best illustrated by his use of the tree image. The tree image frequently occurs in this poetry and it could be due to the influence of the medieval Kannada Vachana poetry. For Ramanujan, the tree represents an ever-growing ramification of the family. In the beginning it occurs in various contexts. But it gradually culminates into ‘Vamsa Virksha’. ‘In A Leaky Tap’, he wants the true to write/like that other snake/we saw/under the beak/ of the crow, when pecked by the woodpecker, while in ‘Anxiety’ he visualizes fear as a tree without branches:

“Not branches as the fear tree,
it has naked roots and secret twigs”

But in the second collection of poems **Relations**, the image of tree acquires a new dimension and emerges as a symbol of family tree. Hitherto, it represented the relation between man and nature, but here it is symbolic of the ever-widening family relations and stands for ‘Vamsa Vriksha’. The branching off of the tree is symbolic of the ever-growing family tree. In ‘A Lapse of Memory’, the tree image culminates into a symbol of family. Whatever be the image, a snake, a fish or a tree, it is invariably connected with some incident where the family figures. It is the family which looms large at the back of several of his images. As Sudhir Kakar says,

“A separation from the family, whatever, the necessity or reason for such a step, not only brings a sense of insecurity in a worldly, social sense, it also means the loss of ‘significant others’, who guarantee the sense of sameness and affirm the inner continuity of the self”. (p.34)

For Ramanujan, family is also a means through which he tries to relate himself to India. His world is paradigmatic of the country to which he belongs. The family is a representative unit of the social milieu. Hence, a poem is not effective of worthwhile and remains a mere linguistic exercise, if it does not talk about wife, a girl friend or a sister or death of a far off cousin,

“..... poems aren’t even words
enough to rankle, infect
or make wife, girl friend or sister
and I’m not talking of strangers
or the unborn” (Any Cow’s Horn Can do it)

He considers himself a ‘distillation’ of the past, a link in the long chain of family descent. Hence, he talks about his grandfather as well as his unborn daughter. Parthasarathy considers this as Ramanujan’s signal achievement: “Ramanujan’s repossession through his poetry, of the past of his family and his sense of himself as a distillation of that past it so me a signal achievement” (P.41). Ramanujan fully realizes that his cultural roots are very deep in his Hindu past. It is this past, which gives him cultural sustenance in an alien setting. Being skeptical and rational in his temperament he assesses the conventional views of Hindustan. He has reservation on some of the Hindu attitudes. He even satirizes some of them in his poetry and the sarcasm is evident in how he spells the word ‘Hindu’. In ‘Hindu’ to his Body’ he spells it as ‘Hindu’, but in other poems, which appear in **Relations**, he spells it as ‘Hindoo’. In “The Hindoo; he doesn’t Hurt a Fly or a Spider either”, he recounts the adultery of his ancestry, the great grandmother; he refers to the Hindu concept of rebirth rather ironically. He skillfully develops the image of spider and its web to represent the illegitimate relation between his great grandmother and the fisherman:

“...don’t hurt a fly. Why, I cannot hurt a spider either, not even a black widow, for who can tell who’s who? Can you? May be its once again my great swinging grandmother and that other.... my one true ancestor”. (p.19)

The image of the spider and its web is strongly reminiscent of the Upanishads and the Vachanas of Mahadeviyakka, but with slight change in connotation in his poems. The persona of the poem truly represents his great grandfather in his timidity and suspicion. Ramanujan seems to mock here at the ineffectiveness and complacency of Hindus who with a sense of resignation accept everything in life in the name of Karma. He suggests rather ironically that by making a small adjustment in our attitude and believing in Karma, we can solve the problems of conscience. The theme of apathy to human suffering can be



seem in 'Breaded Fish' and 'A River'. In a powerful phrase 'grained indifference of sand', the poet brings out the indifference of people to the unclaimed corpse of the destitute in 'Breaded Fish', while the general insouciance of people and poets to deaths in floods is depicted in 'A River'. His skeptical attitude to Hindu past and beliefs which brings out the truth how irrational beliefs erode the human element in man can be considered as one of his great achievements. Ramanujan, 'the past never passes. Either the individual past or historical past or cultural past. It is with us, it is what gives us the richness of understanding....' The past has always been apart of his being. It not only gives him the richness of understanding but also helps him adumbrate a philosophy of life.

"Reminiscences are about past experiences whether pleasant or unpleasant; whether sane or insane; whether human or inhuman memories. They have become the sources for A.K. Ramanujan to distillate the poetry of his choice. 'Reminiscences of the past' in his poetic life perpetually haunts, inculcates and trouble his present and also press him to have no other choice but to create the poetic pearls" (P.63). One of the recurrent concerns in Ramanujan's poetry as a whole is the nature of the human body and its relation to the natural world. Reminiscences blend with the theme and his poetic skills have created poetic masterpieces. This theme first appears in **The Striders** (1966) in an early sonnet called 'Towards Simplicity', which represents the body as a natural mechanism. His remembrances on his school learnings are being used extensively in this poem. 'Self-portrait', a poem in **The Striders** with which Ramanujan usually began his public readings, identifies this problem precisely when it suggests that the self is more an absence than a presence in private as well as public space. When one reads his poem 'Sankes', one is surprised that the poet with the background of a surprised that the poet with the background of a Hindu Brahmin family presents something so different from the Hindu tradition. In the third stanza he records his experience of snake-worship at home in India:

"A basketful of ritual cobras
comes into the tame tile house,
their brown – wheat glisten ringed with ripples,
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 such
and bare the black-line design
etched on the brass of the saucer".

Later, he recounts the encounter with the snake while coming back to his home in America. His "click shod heel suddenly strikes/and slushes on a snake". He "leave(s) him sealed" and coolly walks through the wood and shows no sign of regret of having killed the snake which the Hindus worship. Here he comes closer to the Judaeo Christian tradition than the Hindu tradition. The snake in the old deterrent is associated with Satean, Man "shall bruise they head; And thou shall bruise his heel". Cobra was, the totem animal of a Dravidian clan in India. Cobra is even today worshipped by the people in the South India. Appearance of the snake is considered as betokening the presence of Lord Murugan.

Many of his poems either directly or indirectly refer to his family and relations. In 'Snakes', where he depicts his fear of snakes, the family figures. The scaly braids of his sister remind him of snakes. Their memory, in turn, carries him back into the world of his childhood inhabited by his father, mother and sisters. Further, the black lorgnettes on the Cobra's hood appear to him "ridiculous, alien, like some terrible aunt". The poem 'Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House' presents an ironic profile of a large Hindu extended family, tracing its history thematically from about the end of the twentieth century to the third quarter of the twentieth century. The poem, evocatively reflects on the customs, rituals, myths and superstitions that are part of the family's everyday life; the permutations and combinations in which character traits are transmitted over several generations; the upbringing of children and the shaping of several kinds of adult lives; the private and public facets of the family in a web of social transactions; and the series of minor and major tragedies that strike individual members and affect the whole household. Besides, the poem also alludes satirically to the colonial economy of the Raj and symbolically re-enacts the family's transition from a traditional Indian world to a distinctly more modern one over the period of a century. Colored by the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies that are typical of Ramanujan's social poetry, this poem paints one of the most memorable 'national' portraits' of modern India that we have in the twentieth century poetry.

The poems collected in **Second Sight** are about the 'Elements of Composition' talking about the poet's Indian experiences and remembrances of the Hindu ideas of the five elements (Pancha bhuta), the earth, the fire, the wind, the water and the sky. Here one can watch things which are in a continuous state of flux over a period of time to grasp the inherent beauty of nature and a great work of art:



“.... add uncle’s even fingers
making shadow-plays of rajas
and cats, hissing, becoming
fingers again”.

A lovely reminiscences of the poet about his uncle’s dexterity in shadow-play using his eleven fingers to create fascinating images of kings, cats etc. and sounds like hissing and the transformation of the shadows to fingers again. The horrific existence of mutilated lepers Madurai against the exquisitely ornate stone sculptures of goddess of dance in the majestic Meenakshi temple:

“add the lepers of Madurai,
male, female, married with children
---lion faces, crabs for claws,
clotted on their shadows under
the stone-eyed goddess of dance,
mere pillars, moving as nothing on
earth can move....” (P.19)

The whole poem is about the impact of time on the composition, the process of the decomposition (the Madurai lepers) and finally death and destruction (eating and being eaten).

The conclude, A.K. Ramanujan’s poetry and his literary contributions are one or the other way humanly connected to this childhood nostalgia and native influence.

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