
WEB OF MEMORIES IN A.K RAMANUJAN'S POETRY

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In new Indian poetry in English emerging in sixties and seventies A.K. Ramanujan occupies a prominent place by virtue of his intellectual substance, his ineluctable language and his ability to depict the inner human struggle. His poetic voice tends to be vigorous and his sensibility remains essentially modern. There is a marked sophistication born of an urban surrounding in his verse. He takes to his vocation seriously and treats it as exacting discipline. The English critic William Walsh rightly grades him with such fastidious Indo English poets as Nissim Ezekiel and R. Parthasarthy. In his scholarly introduction to *Readings In Commonwealth Literature* (1973), Walsh writes that the highest achievement of Indian writing in English is in fiction. In the words of Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan is one of those gifted writers who have used English language with force, delicacy and sensitivity.

Nissim Ezekiel has high praise for A.K. Ramanujan:

A.K. Ramanujan's poems have the flavor of modern classic [. . .] The standards for Indo English poetry today are set by Ramanujan. His poems function like precision instruments, even the titles are meticulously imaginative and not merely utilitarian.

In *The Striders* (1966) and *Relations* (1977), the poems seem to have, as stated by Bruce King, grown out of the expatriate poet's Indian experiences and sensibility will all its memories of family, local places, images, beliefs and history (115). Despite A.K. Ramanujan's spell in US, his mind always feels drawn towards his native country, India. The members of his family flash before his mind's eye and the local customs and conventions get branded on his

memory and leave their marks on the poems. Scholar after scholar on Ramanujan's works has referred to the remarkable aspect of Ramanujan's poetry. Premila Paul states:

A.K.Ramanujan's poetry deals with both individual and racial memory. Memory becomes a vital factor in keeping alive his relationship with India, within and without. It is more than a psychological prop or support. It is the very emotional space and creative springboard. To refer to memory as a major theme in A.K Ramanujan's poetry in a way belittles its significance. It is not an object observed or experience analyzed. Memory is the poet, his poetry is his memory, he writes on and of his memory. The act of remembering is not a dull cud chewing of the past: it brings alive all in his past that is usable....It is an active lingering to leap forward with vigor. An active memory helps to establish rootedness. The awareness and assurance of the rootedness in turn establishes emotional stability and enables him to integrate the past and the present, the immediate and the remote, all that is within and without, Western work orientedness and the Indian human relatedness. (70)

Memory opens up endless possibilities for poetry. It is a thumbscrew that a poet turns to his or her advantage. Most of the poems are memory poems. Perpetuating past events and experiences across time and space, he makes them timeless and space-free. Full of vibrant visuals and radiant symbols, he empowers his art through memory. M.K Naik aptly remarks, "On the personal plane, the insistent preoccupation with the past produces a poetry in which memory plays a vigorous, creative role."

A.K Ramanujan claims that his mind is a storehouse of various trivial things like nursery rhymes on Tipu Sultan or Jack and Jill or the cosmetic use of gold during the golden age of Guptas but it is an irony that memory plays hide and seek game with him when it comes to the matter of remembering a face from a sea of faces and the words thrown at random at him or by him. He comes to the conclusion:

Memory,
in a crowd of memories, seems
to have no place
at all unforgettable things ("On Memory")

A.K Ramanujan uses the self as a centre for a poem, and his memories have a local habitation in Tamil Brahmin society. His topics are specific and situations are particular. His memories, pleasant or bitter, are long cherished. Many of his poems show the poet's assured identity within the family. At the same time when he talks about the members of his family, he underplays his emotions thus avoiding sentimentality. In an interview Ramanujan says, "Indians are writing poetry about what they know, about their experiences. They are not imitating British poetry" (*Times Of India*, 13)

The family is usually the central metaphor that explores the hinterland of his memory and knocks out his experience into disturbingly vivid forms. A.K Ramanujan's poetry shows how an Indian poet in English derives his strength from going back to his roots . . . his childhood memories. As Parthasarthy says, "The family for A.K Ramanujan is in fact one of the central metaphors with which he thinks." (95)

In "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House," the poet has a nostalgic peep into his past and family. A large traditional Hindu joint family gets projected in the poem. So great is the absorbing quality of the great house that the things come in everyday to lose themselves among other things lost long ago:

nothing
that ever comes to this house
goes out

The poem catalogues things that come into the house from outside to stay forever: "wandering cows," "library books," neighbor's dishes," "sons-in-law" and "daughters-in-

law". There is a mingling of pathos and humor with an ironic tinge in the visual picture of "sons-in-law":

who forget their mothers

but stay to check

accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces ("Small Scale Reflections on a Great House")

The poems of Ramanujan are finely crafted pieces, and the words shine with depth of meaning. The words create a rhythm and form which enhance the value of his poetry. Ramanujan has laid equal stress on the meaning, as well as the design of each poem. The designer poems of Ramanujan are not only a treat to the eye, but also indicate a multi-layered meaning. To identify the central themes of Ramanujan's poems one has to proceed cautiously with patience and imagination.

Ramanujan's poetry is a depiction of human sentiments, feelings and emotions in a direct way without any gloss or sophistication. There are no traces of alien influences on his poetry, in spite of his long stay abroad. His poetry has technical excellence and bears the stamp of his individuality. Ramanujan's poems have a technical perfection which is exemplary. His poetry is never pedantic or verbose and is written in a language which is crisp, intense and casual.

Shirish Chindhadhe opines:

Ramanujan is basically a poet of memories. Of all the memories the ones that are anchored to his familial, personal past make his poetry very redolent with the characteristic native element of the Indian experience. In fact, his alienation finds a consolatory transformation in his vivid, subtle and innumerable remembrances. All his poetic collections are full of poems, inspired by the remote personal past, reminding the poet of umpteen incidents, relations, situations and experiences that are ineluctably associated with his family in relation to its own self. (63)

In A.K Rmanujan's poetry the present is rooted in the past which itself changes by being looked at through the eyes of present. He may consciously echo the ideas and phrases of others but at the same time his poems derive the strength from his own life-what he sees, experiences and feels including what he is told and what he reads. While A.K Ramanujan uses memories of South India as his subject, his concern is rather with how the past has shaped him than as a nostalgia for lost paradise. The nostalgic tone does not portray the nostalgia of an individual from times and things past. It is rather collective nostalgia of a whole people who look back, often in an attitude of love-hate, to the past, at once drawn towards and repelled by it (Tilak).

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