

THE PARADOX AND AMBIVALENCE: DUALITY OF EXISTENCE IN THE POETRY OF A. K. RAMANUJAN

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ABSTRACT

A.K. Ramanujan unlike other expatriate poets has the ability to bring into perfect consonance the two different worlds—the inner world of his self and Indian reminiscences i.e. his past, and the outer world of his vocation and domicile i.e. his present. Ramanujan's persona is a concoction of both and he is not only well aware of the conflict between the two but also takes pleasure in this incongruence. His poems present a unique amalgamation of Indian soul and western mind. All his emotions and experiences take an Indian Origin, but the Rationale he attaches to them is essentially western. He is like a tree that has its roots carried from India and has developed in the western soil, water and air, yielding beautiful flowers in western hue but Indian fragrance. Ramanujan's Persona is a theatre decked in occidental backdrops where oriental scenes depicting familial relations in all hues are staged, and the poet himself is the audience and the critic too, watching and analyzing with a detached interest.

Although there are instances where he feels alienated and rootless with a muddled identity, for instance when he says he is a portrait 'date unknown', but confirms the contrary feeling when he says the portrait is 'often signed in a corner' by his father or maker, thus confirming his Indian roots. He is a poet who juxtaposes the duality of eastern and western sensibilities within himself and perfectly arbitrates between the two. Neither is he an Indian conformist nor a revolutionary modernist advocating westernization- he is rather an envoy who elucidates the East to the West and vice-versa with perfect composure."

KEYWORDS: Expatriate Poet, Muddled Identity, Juxtaposition, Envoy, Ambivalence

INTRODUCTION

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 skeptically and wryly on their new home land as outsiders, with a feeling of something having been lost in the process of growth."¹ These poets, though settled in a foreign land for good, seem to be floating loose between two lands gazing with nostalgia at the homeland they have forsaken and seeking new roots in the newly adopted land.

But A. K. Ramanujan on the contrary proves to be a poet of distinction and rare accomplishment who has the unique perspective of holding two altogether different worlds together in his detached glance adopting the beautiful and rejecting the ugly from both. The present paper endeavors to present Ramanujan's duality of existence and his ability to co-exist placidly in two different worlds without any efforts to contradict them or amend them, perfectly blending both the cultures in his variegated persona.

RAMANUJAN'S INNER AND OUTER SELF

Ramanujan dwells peacefully on the intersection between two worlds – his internal and intimate world of his core identity that lies in his Indian reminiscences and memories i.e. his past, and the outer world of his domicile that chiefly accounts for his attitude and perspective i.e. his present. He searches for his roots and finally finds them in the Indian family where he spent his early life. The closely knit patchwork of relations clothes his fundamental self – his soul that is purely Indian – emotional and disciplined by its value system. His Indian inner self is the prime source of inspiration in his poetry. But at times he discards the pompous and burdensome customs of his native land. This obviously is the impact of his outer self – his American existence – that shapes his reasoning and discretion. There is an invisible and perceptive symbiosis of internal and external essence in Ramanujan's poetry. He uses poetry as a tool to search his self. All his poems lead to the journey within. Through the varying themes and treatment, he is searching the meaning of his existence in his poetry. It is the simultaneity of his twin experiences- the one Indian, and the other American that forms the variegated world of Ramanujan's poetry.

It is his inner world of Indian memories that give the poet the raw material for his poems and it is his mature rational and bold perspective of his outer world that allows him to treat them with an entirely new angle that other Indian English poets might not have the courage to bring into light. His poem "looking for a cousin on a swing", for instance, presents an altogether different aspect of the sweet innocent intimacy of the cousins that against the familial possibility of intimacy of cousins, that is considered an incest, converts into a yearning for romantic experience when the cousins grow up into adolescents and are reminded of the experience – the touch of "innocence" which no more remains innocent and gives a feel of sensuousness and a desire for romance.

The influence of a religious family where Ramanujan spent his formative childhood years has endowed him with a rich system that helps him understand the meaning of life in a wider perspective. He has preserved his faith in the Hindu philosophy of the Unity Consciousness. His recognition of the oneness of all life is manifested in his poem "Christmas":

For a moment, I no

Longer know

Leaf from parrot

Or branch from root

nor, for that matter

that tree

from you or me. (S 30-31)

The poem further emphasizes the dissimilarity between the oriental and occidental traditions through the tree image in the same poem. The two different cultures are brought to his mind by the juxtaposition of the two images of the bare leafless tree standing outside his window in the USA and the lively tree seen out of his window in India which is more than a mere "stiff geometrical shape". The poet illustrates this oneness of life through the example of the sap in his poem 'A Hindu to his Body' when he expresses his wish to "rise in the sap of trees" and "feel the weight / of honey - hives in my branching / and the burlap weave of weaver - birds in my hair."

HIS WORLD OF MEMORIES

Ramanujan is basically a poet of memories. A.N.Dwivedi rightly remarks that, “The family relations always haunt the poet, and there are many good poems which owe their origin to the recollected personal emotions. These poems deal with his memory of his relations and the ambiguous freedom that life away from them confers.” He often confirms his commitment to the native south Indian experience that he preserves even after his long stay in America:

Letting go
 of fairytales
 is letting go
 of what will not
 let go:
 mother, grandmother the fat cook
 in widow’s white
 who fed me rice and ogres (Collected Poems – P 260)

Ramanujan believes that one can never disconnect himself from the memories. The reminiscences of the past and history are crucial in deciding upon one’s identity. The poet rummages around in this world of past memories to find the meaning of his self. Ramanujan connects his memories with the present life in such a remarkable way that reading his poetry becomes an exquisite pleasure. Ramanujan is absolutely engrossed in his past recollections, Indian history, mythology and folklore. His dealing with the theme of quest for self is mainly rooted in memories of his childhood located in the culture of South India.

HIS DETACHED PERSPECTIVE

Ramanujan’s demeanor is truly impressive when he looks at and into things the way they are without attaching any personal annotations or conclusions to them. Ramanujan’s poetry suggests an entirely novel vision for the expatriate Indian English poets that their poetry must integrate the necessary verve, augmentation and continuity. He is able to blend the two cultures together beautifully. He has the exceptional outlook by virtue of which he is capable of keeping in synergy two worlds, entirely different in their cultures and dogmas, together in his detached glance and side by side being completely detached – espousing only the aspects worth taking and criticizing others those are burdensome in both. His persona is a theatre decked in occidental backdrops where oriental scenes depicting familial relations in all hues are staged, and the poet himself is the audience and the critic too, watching and analyzing with a detached interest. He is a poet who juxtaposes the duality of eastern and western sensibilities within himself and perfectly arbitrates between the two. Neither is he an Indian conformist nor a revolutionary modernist advocating westernization- he is rather an envoy who elucidates the East to the West and vice-versa with perfect composure.”

Ramanujan doesn’t hesitate in criticizing certain superstitious facets of his religion. For him the Hindu philosophy of non-violence sometimes looks like cowardice to the poet who has lived in a world known for rationality, dynamism, fast scientific and technological growth and violence. There is the risk of the standard degenerating into insensitivity and

apathy in real practice. This feeling is portrayed aptly in the poem “THE HINDOO: *he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either*”. As the Hindu cannot hurt a fly or a spider, his great grandfather continued to be a helpless dupe of and quiet witness to the infidelity of his wife.

The spirit
of Great Grandfather, that still man,
untimely witness, timeless eye,
perpetual outsider,
watching as only husbands will
a suspense of nets vibrate
under wife and enemy (Collected Poems – p. 63)

In “Obituary” he commemorates the death of his father, and makes satirical remarks on customs and rituals linked with the cremation of the deceased:

he burned properly
at the cremation

several spinal discs, rough,
some burned to coal, for sons
to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest
said, facing east
where three rivers met
near the railway station; - (Collected Poems - P111)

It is often evident in his work that the poet finds his internal world and his roots in India but he often finds himself uncomfortable in the stereotyped philosophy and breaks out of these bonds and emerges out as a cosmopolitan. The following lines very well bring out his internal conflict between his Indian morals and modern realism that ends up into a revolt:

Her tumbled hair suddenly known
as silk in my angry hand, I shook a little
and took her, behind the laws of my land. - Still another View of Grace (CP – P 45)

But Ramanujan is not biased in criticizing Indian ethos only: he equally mocks and satirizes the western traditions too. He talks about the western motif of modernity like the advocacy for the freedom to seek out a vent for sexual desires, the medium of entertainment through the motion pictures and the indifferent pursuit of science like the protest against nuclear tests. He confesses that he must follow the so-called modern trends of the west to save himself from being labeled as a foreigner there.

Yes, I know all that. I should be modern.

Marry again. See strippers at the Tease.

Touch Africa. Go to the movies.

Impale a six inch spider

under a lens. Join the test-

ban, or become The Outsider.

HIS INTERNAL INTERROGATION FOR IDENTITY

Although there are instances where he feels alienated and rootless with a muddled identity, for instance in his poem 'self portrait' when he says he is a portrait 'date unknown', but confirms the contrary feeling when he says the portrait is 'often signed in a corner' by his father or maker, thus confirming his Indian roots.

"I resemble everyone

but myself.....

.....

the portrait of a stranger,

date unknown, often signed in a corner

by my father. "

It is evident that a painter would definitely give the date to his portrait. But Ramanujan finds the date absent! He feels the loss of identity. He envisions a stranger inside himself. But for the poet's confirmation of his Indian roots he finds his father's signature. The portrait has been painted by his father.

The Indian ethos are abundantly found in his poetry with varied degree of treatment

will one day be short of breath,

lose its thrust,

turn cold, dehydrate and leave

a jawbone with half a grin

near a pond (Collected Poems P 209)

CONCLUSIONS

E. N. Lall Remarks, "Ramanujan's poems take their origin in a mind that is simultaneously Indian and Western -- Indian mode of experiencing an emotion and the western mode of defining it." Despite adopting the western means of expression, despite being open to those changes and attitudes, it cannot be judged that Ramanujan solely believed in them. Neither did he advocate modernization and westernization like several expatriates. His Poetry resonates with innate Indian sensibility together with a logical understanding that was a result of a long stay in the West. He is a poet of "mixed sensibility," who has been enriched by his experience of a dispute within him, between two traditions and between two aspects of his persona, and he uses his poetry to search his true self.

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