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## Research Article



## A.K. Ramanujan: A Poet of Different Cultures and Languages

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### Abstract

The paper explores the impact of different cultures and languages in the poetic writings of A. K. Ramanujan. He has a full command over Indian culture, scriptures and rituals. Tamil, Kannad, Sanskrit and English languages are well known to him. Language is a very important tool in the formulation of a culture and its aesthetics, as it is a medium of expression. Without

language no human culture can be imagined. Culture is a manifestation of the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular group of human society. It is a code of conduct which guides and control a certain human society. Ramanujan was deeply rooted in Indian culture and tradition, which is evident in his work. However, his exposure to Western education, particularly his studies in the United States, also influenced his literary style and themes. As a result, Ramanujan's work reflects a unique blend of different cultures and languages, and he is known for bridging the gap between Indian and Western literary traditions. *Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary* defines culture as “the customs and beliefs; ways of life and social organization of a particular country or group” (373). The cultural and linguistic influences are evident in the literature of any nation, therefore, it always becomes a perfect source of information. Literature of any nation keeps the record of its history, geography, culture and tradition. For instance, we have to study Leo Tolstoy to know the history and geography of nineteenth century Russian literature; similarly, if we want to know something about the English culture, we have to study English literature as literature is a part of culture. In the same way, there are several languages and cultures that are observed in India and each of them are closely connected with the theme of Indianness and this is how it paves the way of unity in diversity.

**Keywords:** Culture, Language, Identity, Indianness, Religion, Custom, Diaspora, Upanishad, Cultural barriers, Race, Ethnicity

A. K. Ramanujan is a versatile scholar, poet, and translator, whose poetic voice tends to be vigorous and occupies a prominent place in ‘new’ Indian English poetry. In the poetry of Ramanujan, we may trace the enduring impact of Dravidian culture because of his south Indian origin. He was a polyglot, fluent in several languages including Tamil, Kannada, English, Telugu, and Sanskrit. This linguistic proficiency allowed him to explore and engage with a diverse range of literary traditions, and helped him create a distinct voice in his poetry. He translated classical and modern works from various Indian languages into English, showcasing the richness of Indian literature to a global audience. In his poetry, Ramanujan often explored themes like identity, culture, and the human experience. He masterfully combined elements of Indian folklore, mythology, and history with modern sensibilities to create a unique poetic expression. His work seamlessly interweaved the personal and the universal, the ancient and the contemporary, and the Eastern and the Western.

Ramanujan had a full command over Tamil and Kannada languages as well as literature that made him a poet of vast understanding of culture and the country. He translated some Tamil texts into English. He was fully acquainted with Sangam sahitya of south India which gave him an outstanding poetic vision. Some of Ramanujan’s notable poetry collections include— *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), and *Second Sight* (1986). Additionally, he published several important translations, such as *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967), *Speaking of Siva* (1973), and *Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil* (1985).

Ramanujan's firm faith in his cultural roots is one of the salient features of his poetry. He discovered two ancient Tamil texts in 1962 and they were Kuruntakui (an anthology of love poetry from the first century A.D.) and Tolkappiyam (this gives the explanation of rhetoric and conventions). These texts left a deep impression on Ramanujan, and he began his poetic career as a translator. By drawing on the diverse cultural and linguistic influences of his background, Ramanujan created a unique voice that has continued to resonate with readers across generations. His work serves as a testament to the power of literature to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, bringing people together and fostering a greater understanding of the human experience.

His translated works have a diverse place in the literary and cultural world. Bruce King writes about his translations, "as a follower of Ezra Pound he translates as if original were a contemporary poem of today. He makes it 'new'; such translations never seem archaic or literal; and make no apologies". Ramanujan has translated several Tamil poems into English in his book entitled 'Poems of Love and War'. In one of his translated poems, he describes that how a beloved depicts beautifully about her lover who is equipped with the ornaments of flowers:

... my man wore the flowers;  
And there were young leaves for me;  
their blossoms gold;  
their buds; sapphire;  
tell me what do you call  
those trees on his mountain  
slopes? (*Poems of Love and War*, 9)

There is a strong sense of dedication to be observed in this poem, as the beloved chooses to beautify herself with young leaves while lovely flowers are to be her lover's ornament. This shows the emotion of a deep love between the beloved and her lover. The impact of these love poems is found in his English poems like "Still Another View of Grace", "Love Poem for a Wife 1 & 2", "Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees" and many others. Ramanujan gives a picture of his own love story in the poem 'Still Another View of Grace'. Indian society was very conservative and traditional at that time and it was not easy to marry a girl from different race, culture and community. The poet honestly describes in the poem that how he accepts Molly, his beloved, as his wife against the rules of Brahmin community:

Bred Brahmin among singers of shivering hymns  
I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the street  
beyond the constable's beat.' But there she stood  
upon that dusty road on a nightlit april mind  
and gave me a look. Commandments crumbled  
in my father's past. Her tumbled hair suddenly known  
as silk in my angry hand, I shook a little  
and took her, behind the laws of my land. (*Collected Poems*, 45)

Ramanujan translated some Tamil religious songs which were written in the honor of Lord Murugan and Tirumal, as it is in the tradition of Sanskrit Stutikavya (canticle) in which a

writer either adores the god or prays for the betterment of mankind. He has a deep interest in the Indian religious texts and contexts. Poet has a spiritual depth that shows his faith in the god and his created universe. One of his translated poems from Tamil which is in the praise of Lord Vishnu (Tirumal); Ramanujan translates-

In fire; you are the heat,  
In flowers; you are the scent,  
Among stones; you are the diamond,  
In words; you are truth,  
Among virtues; you are love. (*Poems of Love and War*; 218)

Such impacts of Tamil literature are evident in many of his English poems. In one of his frequently quoted poems, the poet prays to Lord Murugan to cure all the problems of humanity at once. 'Prayer to Lord Murugan' which is also a Sanskrit Stutikavya composed in the honour of Lord Murugan shows the influence of Tamil literature on the poet. The poet adores Him as:

Lord of lost travelers,  
find us. Haunt us  
down.  
Lord of answers,  
cure us at once  
of prayers. (*Collected Poems*, 117)

Diasporic sensibility is prevailed in the writings of A. K. Ramanujan. Nostalgia is one of the most persistent emotions, sweet memories of one's birthplace. Despite poet's long stay abroad, his poems are colored with nostalgic memories of his native land, but he tempers these recollections with ironic stance. Ramanujan seeks inspiration from classical Tamil and Kannada poets to bring an Indian outlook to his poems. Ramanujan prints the memory of his native land, his family and native culture in poem after poem. It is the connection of his roots, culture, tradition, family and people that brings an emotional stability to his poems and enables him to live in an alien world. He understands the cultural geography of the world as evident in his poems. He is often guided by his Hindu sankaras to keep his native land in his heart. D. Ramkrishna comments about Ramanujan's adjustment between Indian and western culture and ideas. Ramakrishna comments: "He (Ramanujan) is different from the expatriates like an exotic. Ramanujan rootedness in Indian culture and involvement with American culture has resulted in his skillful articulation of both the Indian and the western ideas with ease... He is unique in bringing together two great cultures, having been at home in both." (*Ramanujan's Credo, Millennium Perspectives on A. K. Ramanujan.*)

Sanskrit is one of the main sources of Ramanujan's poetic writings. His wonderful command over Sanskrit language and literature has provided a charm to his poems. The influence of Sanskrit language and its literature is found in his poems like 'Element of Composition', 'No Amnesiac King', 'Questions', and many others. These poems have a direct connection with the Upanishads and mythology of Indian Sanskrit culture. The poet studies Sanskrit literature and Upanishads abundantly that is often traced in his writings. The poem

‘Elements of Composition’ gives the account of the creation of human body in a scientific and philosophic way. Ramanujan writes:

Composed as I am, like others,  
of elements of certain well-known lists,  
father’s seed and mother’s egg  
gathering earth, air, fire, mostly  
water, into a mulberry mass,  
moulding calcium,  
carbon, even gold, magnesium and such... (*Collected Poems*, 121)

Lord Krishna says to Arjun in the Geeta, “*bhumir-apo ’nalo vayuh kham mano buddhir eva cha/ ahankara itiyam me bhinna prakritir ashtadha* (*Bhagavad Gita: Chapter7, Verse 4*)

Swami Adgadanand translates this shloka:

I am the creator of all nature with its eight division- earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, intellect and ego. The concluding lines of this poem shows the impact of the Taitreeya Upanishad as the poet writes: “caterpillar on a leaf, eating, / being eaten. (*Collected Poems*, 123)

The last lines of the poem, ‘Elements of Composition’ has another cultural point of view. In this poem, he refers to the ritual of ‘Muharram tigers’ which is performed with tiger-skin the pulikali in Kerala (the tiger dance). It is celebrated to mourn the death of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. The intention behind it is to get closer to the Lord. Ramanujan mentions it to ascertain man’s endless desire to be one with the God.

“Caterpillar on a leaf, eating  
being eaten.” (*Collected Poems*, 123)

This image of caterpillar is minutely discussed by Bruce King, a critic of A. K. Ramanujan. Bruce King has also studied Indian scriptures and Upanishad in order to make his criticism more powerful and logical. The explanation of Bruce King is quite appropriate:

The image of the caterpillar eating and being eaten alludes to a well-known phrase in the Upanishads where it represents the continual recycling of the world of desire. Behind it is the notion that Atman or Brahman created air, fire, and water which brought forth the earth. From earth come the plants, seeds, food, and man. That we come from earth, live by food, and return to earth shows that we come from and will return to Brahman. The Taittiriya Upanishad (3.10.5) says: I am that food which eats the eater of food.’ Ramanujan has translated this as ‘Food Chain, Sanskrit Style.’ (*Three Indian Poets*, 99-100)

Ramanujan regards that every being in the universe is given life by the almighty Brahman. Brahman creates, operate and finally destroys everything in this mortal world where nothing remains forever. The poet believes in Hindu gods and their designed universe very firmly as he writes in the poem, ‘No Fifth Man’:

The fourth brahman knew how  
To breathe life into it,  
Was about to do so  
When the fifth one (*Collected Poems*, 244)

Ramanujan had great sense of cultural and social understanding. Further he writes in the same poem:

The fourth one said,  
'Of course, I'm giving it life.  
I'm its papa. This is  
my pussycat. Just watch'. (*Collected Poems*, 244)

Another evidence of cultural and religious aspects is witnessed in the poem, 'zero'. Zero is permanent and everlasting, it never gets affected under the influence of mighty time. The poem shows the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish beliefs as the poet writes:

The Mayans had a glyph of zero  
he said  
The Hindus thought zero was holy  
I said  
The Jewish god was one, the Buddhist was zero  
he said  
Take away the zero from zero it's still zero  
I said (*Collected Poems*, 263)

Ramanujan remembers one of the most famous love stories of Shakuntala and Dushyanta of Ancient India when he goes to seaside marketplace. When he looks at dead-white belly of a fish, his mind catches the ring scene of their love story that got tensed because of sage Durwasha's curse. 'No Amnesiac King' is a poem seems to be inspired by a love story of Dushyanta and Shakuntala written by a great Sanskrit poet Kalidas in *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. They married secretly in a monastery of a hermit in Kanva. Once sage Durwasha came to Shakuntala's monastery, but she didn't give him due attention and respect as she was thinking of her husband. Durwasha became angry and cursed her that her husband would forget her like a lunatic. Shakuntala's friend requested Durwasha to forgive her, then Durwasha gave her a relief from the curse by saying that Dushyant would recognise her by a ring which has already been given by Dushyant to Shakuntala as a symbol of their love. The poet describes the story of that ring which was found in the belly of a fish as Shakuntala lost this ring in the river when she was taking water. Ramanujan gives a beautiful depiction of this incident:

The one well-timed memorable fish,  
so one can cut straight with the royal knife  
to the ring waiting in the belly,  
and recover at one stroke all lost memory (*Collected Poems*:126)

Ramanujan has a deep understanding of mythologies and culture of ancient India. He composed mythologies poems which show his broader understanding of Indian myths and scriptures. Ramanujan's wide understanding of Indian Upanishad reflects in many of his poems. The poem 'Questions' starts with the quotation of the Mundaka Upanishad:

Two birds on the self same tree:  
One of them eats the fruit of the tree,  
The other watches without eating. (Mundaka: 3.1.1)



The opening lines of the poem expresses the idea of Taittiriya Upanishad. The poet writes:

Eating, being eaten,  
parts of me watch, parts of me burn (*Collected Poems*:130)

The influence of English culture is clearly apparent in the poems of A. K. Ramanujan. He tries to establish a fine balance between his native culture and American lifestyle. The impact of English culture can easily be traced in the poem, 'THE HINDOO: he reads his GITA and is calm at all events' as he writes:

I've learned to watch lovers without envy  
as I'd watch in a bazaar lens  
houseflies rub legs or kiss. I look at wounds calmly. (*Collected Poems*, 79)

Here the poet shares the idea of love for mankind that can be witnessed in 'Jesus's New Commandment' (Book of John: 13/34, The Holy Bible): "A new command I gave you, love one another. As I have loved you: so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another". (117)

In 'Take Care', Ramanujan gives an account of American culture and lifestyle there. He finds that his native culture is calm and composed while American ways of living is quite chaotic. The poem gives a vivid picture of weather, tall buildings, crime in Chicago; he writes:

In Chicago it blows  
hot and cold. Trees  
play fast and loose.  
Kittens and children  
have tics: the old  
have things in their  
eyes. (*Collected Poems*, 103)

Ramanujan writes about the lack of faith in Chicago people. People of Chicago do not realize the value of emotional attachment in the relationships. In India, the relationship of a wife and husband is regarded very pious and trust, Patience, love and forgiveness are the essential qualities that are needed for an ideal relationship. How people are unsafe and anarchy is everywhere as further in the poem he writes:

Small flies sit  
on aspirin and booze.  
Enemies have guns.  
Friends have doubts.  
Wives have lawyers.  
Smudge your windows.  
Draw the blinds.  
All tall buildings  
use telescopes.  
Give daughters pills,  
learn karate.  
Prepare to get raped

Bending for a book. (*Collected Poems*: 103)

He has successfully fused the rational outlook of the west with the native cultural and spiritual heritage of his native soil. Ramanujan uses symbols very accurately from cultural point of view as Swastika that symbolizes divinity and spirituality in Indian religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The Swastika has different connotation in German culture that is evident in the poem ‘Some Indian Use of History on a Rainy Day’. In the third part of the poem, he makes fun of a professor of Sanskrit on cultural exchange in Berlin (Germany) who, lost in rain, tries to identify the German signs to find path and:

Suddenly comes home  
in English, gesture, and Sanskrit  
assimilating  
the swastika  
on the neighbor’s arm” (*Collected Poems*, 75)

In this way, it is seen that Ramanujan’s poems have the influence of several Indian as well as western culture and languages. He has a considerable command over different languages and cultures. His Kannada family background provides him a deep understanding of culture, literature of South India and languages like Tamil and Kannada. Indian customs and rituals are abundantly found in the poetic writings of A. K. Ramanujan. Prof. K. R. S. Iyenger remarks that Ramanujan is established as “one of the most talented of the new poets.” (671)

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