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A.K. Ramanujan's Select Poems: A Humanistic Approach

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Abstract

Attipat Krishnaswamy Ramanujan (1929-1993), needs no introduction in the word of Indian English Poetry. His poems are liked by every person because his poems are either replete with the humanistic approach or his poem have autobiographical elements. He was a poet, translator, playwright and folklorist. He belonged to a Hindu family. He was a trilingual writer who wrote in English, Tamil and Kannada. He has interpreted some works written in Sanskrit and Tamil bases on some classical and modern variants. He had four poetry collections to his credit: *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1986), and *The Black Hen* (1995). Ramanujan's poems are so easy and personal that these poems touch the heart of reader.

Keywords- Indianness, Human Values, Self, Nostalgia

A.K. Ramanujan is one of the very reputed poets from India whose poetry has got worldwide acknowledgement. There are so many themes in his poetry such as the search for self, nostalgia, autobiographical elements, Indian sensibility etc. Bhagat Nayak writes in this context, "It will be more appropriate to say that while the Hindu or the Indian milieu constitutes the 'inner' substance of Rumanian's poetry, the Western milieu shapes the 'outer' substance, and the two co-exist" (Nayak 5).

To begin with the analysis of his poems, "Self-Portrait" is about the struggle of a man for his self and identity. Modern man has always been running after the materialistic pursuits and in that rat race, he has forgotten himself. Another concern is that the human beings are wearing

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hidden masks on their face and it becomes very difficult to judge a person just by his appearance. In this poem, the poet persona is looking for his self that is devoid of desire for money.

Through this poem, the poet is giving preference to his own culture and he has discarded the western culture. In the last words, the poet attacks on the patriarchal pattern of the Indian society where a father gives identity to a person. The poet seems to resemble everyone but he has no identity. Thus, the poet's dilemma is explicit in this poem. The importance of self is "more an absence than a presence" (Dharwadker xxxiii).

Ramanujan's another poem "A River" describes how the poets have romanticised the Vaigai River in Madurai for a long time. Through this poem, the poet has depicted that poets on every other day write about the flood or the emptiness of the river but all the poets forget to mention those who have been affected by the flood.

The speaker begins how the city of Madurai has been called the city of temples and poets and these poets have always sung the same song of the Vaigai River. The poets describe the emptiness of the river and how the sand ribs are seen. The poet gives more complicated details of this river. The people speak about the details of the river and its flood how the flood has carried off three village houses, a pregnant woman and a couple of cows. The poet further writes that the old and new poets have just written on the superfluous matter and they have ignored the tragedies and havocs caused by the flood of the river. The new poets have just copied the style of the old poets and there is no any new evolution or change in their writing style.

The poem "Fear No Fall" is about a legendary Tamil saint Arunagiri. This saint squandered his youth and there is no friend in his old age and he is steeped in despondency and desolation. He becomes a saint by a divine boon and then he composes the finest lyrics in Tamil. In the words of Vinay Dharwadker:

Ramanujan's poetry is like a circular labyrinth, in which all paths lead back to the point from where we start, no matter where we begin: the body in nature embodies natural time, which is the clock tickling inside history, which in turn is the clockwork mechanism inside a society that is paradoxically contained by its most prototypical part, the extended

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family, at the centre of which stands the self, housed in a real and imagined body.

(Dharwadker xxxvi)

For M.K. Naik, the poem ‘Self-Portrait’ is an example how the memories can be used to search for roots. He writes, “A preoccupation with personal familial memories needs must lead in the long run to a search for racial roots. The vital connection between the two is clearly suggested in ‘Self-portrait’ (Naik 15). Bruce King as also remarked that:

Although Ramanujan avoided the personal confessional lyric and aimed at impersonality, it is noticeable that especially in the last poems about love and family there is the assumption that experience, in contrast to desire, will be disenchanting. Sex itself is often a theme, and while the act can be glorious, it ends in shame, fear, arguments. Marriages end in divorce. Children create problems. Without love and someone with whom to share the material comforts and rewards of success, life can be bitter; love, however, can destroy comforts and other pleasures as it brings obsessions, fears, insecurity, and dependency. (King 121)

Ramanujan’s poetry is about the search for self and meaning in his life. His poems have the nostalgic touch because he misses his family in Chicago. He feels lost in America and that’s why he gives priority to the self in his poetry. Niranjana Mohanty also writes in this context:

The self in Ramanujan is not an enclosed entity. It remains its freedom to transact with other points beyond the self – the points such as family, society, culture, religion, the institution of marriage, without any prejudice, or bias, or exoticist euphoria which exerts a smoothness and ease to the transaction. (Bhatnagar 56)

His poem “Anxiety” is also related to a human problem i.e. anxiety which is a kind of extended fear. It is a two-stanza poem. The poem tells that anxiety can diminish human ability and can disturb human life. Practically speaking, fear can be seen on the face of a human being but it is very difficult to define and narrate anxiety. The poet tries to explore anxiety through various symbols and metaphors. Even the poet is not able to describe it. He tells that there are different forms of anxiety. It affects human thinking which makes pessimistic. A pessimistic

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person can never remain happy. Anxiety is extension of tension. It is like a tree but it does not have its branches and roots. The poet writes:

It has naked roots and secret twigs

Not geometric as the parabolas

Of hope, it has loose ends

With a knot at the top

That's me. (Lines 2-6)

This poem tells about Ramanujan's own anxiety. The poet uses pigeons as symbols of hope. There may be different reasons for anxiety and the poet tells that there may be certain reasons of anxiety but it can be stated that anxiety, to some extent, is beyond human control to define and paraphrase.

Ramanujan's poem "Obituary" is about his personal experience. This poem has been written about his father. This poem is a tribute to his deceased father. The poet narrates that his father left all the things undone. Ramanujan's economical condition was not good because his father could not give them the comfort of a rich life.

The condition of the house was not good, the bills were not paid, and his daughters were still unmarried. His father was a hot-tempered person. According to funeral rituals, coins were put on his eyes and then the ashes are flowed into the river. Ramanujan tells about the wrong decisions taken by his father. The poet comes to know that his obituary took two lines in a local newspaper after four weeks of his death. His father was died in the fruit market due to heart attack.

Ramanujan's poem "The Striders" is also a very famous which depicts that human beings have unlimited powers. It is a small insect and not familiar with the poet still the poet writes about this water insect. The striders can be seen near the river bank or any water bodies. These striders have been called the prophets by the poet. These water-bugs walk on water with their light limbs and then dip in water. The poem has been written on a trivial topic but leaves a very meaningful message that every petty creature in this universe is significant and has its own importance. P. Suresh P. and R. Prigya write:

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A.K. Ramanujan works are a prized legacy of humanity. He has risen above the constraints of birth and place. It is not the writer's obligation to keep the world educated and encouraged to confront the considerable catastrophe and clarified regarding customary laws and shameless social practices and unreliable political choices worldwide. (225)

Ramanujan's poem "Extended Family" is a reminiscence of his childhood how his grandfather would pay obeisance to the sun in the Ganga River. He remembers how he would rub soap on his back imitating his father and then would wipe his body with the Turkish towel. The ending of the poem is very touching:

My future
dependednt
on several
people
yet

to come. (Lines 42-47)

His poem "Love Poem for a Wife" tells about his personal life. The poet is not emotionally attached with his wife. He tells that it is because of the reason that they have not shared their childhood. She cannot see his father because he is no more now and he also cannot see her father because in the very old age and short-tempered stage. He is unable to patch up their matters in this age.

One day when the poet's cousin comes, his wife comes to know about the poet's personal life. The poet also comes to know about her dog-ride. His wife becomes happy when she sees his marriage album. When the poet's wife would not come home on time, her father would wait anxiously for her smoking cigarettes. But her father has been gone in the stage of oblivion and he does not remember all this.

From the whole description, it can be concluded that Ramanujan's poetry has a worldwide appeal these days and his poems are about Indian sensibility, traditions, myths, cultures, ethos and rituals. The portrayal of Western temperament does not make him sick rather

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he strikes the balance between the modernism and traditionalism. His poem “The Differences” has been written on a philosophical theme and tells that there is a difference between God and Idol. He mocks at the traditional Hindu beliefs in this poem. Thus, his poems are based on some serious and philosophical issues which, more or less, are about humanistic values. P. Suresh and R. Prigya write about Ramanujan’s nostalgic notions:

Through the poems of A.K. Ramanujan, we see memories form an integral part in his poems are interrelated to his relationships with his mother, father, grandparents, wife, aunts and other members of his family. His entire relative figure who was incorporated in his poems took him further to take him back to his past. (221)

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