

A.K. Ramanujan's Ironic Vision of Hindu's Life: A Confrontation between Eastern Wisdom and Western Skepticism

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Abstract

This research paper “A. K. Ramanujan's Ironic Vision of the Hindu's Life in His Poems: A Confrontation between Eastern Wisdom and Western Skepticism” throws light on diasporic sensibility of Ramanujan, which is resulted in presenting his ironic vision of the Hindu way of life, in his poems. Ramanujan's diasporic condition is resultant of his real life situation. Though he is an expatriate academician taught in Chicago, he did not cut off his connections with his native Indian tradition, feelings and ethos; and he successfully turns the diasporic situation to his advantage and brings the image of India alive in his poetry. His poetry unveils the poet's skeptical awareness of Indian myths and legends, history and glorious past, her varied customs and rituals, her integrated joint families, her religion and philosophy. To delineate these all, he has used irony, wit, understatement and has achieved a nut-like texture and grit in his poetry. . In his own way he displays a unique synthesis of Indian sensibility and Western liberalism, and his poetry has given new gusto and vigour to contemporary Indian English Literature.

A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), “the most gifted poet,” says William Walsh, spent his creative years in US, shaped his poems with the different facets of his experience in two nations and two cultures, and is perhaps one of most all round poets of post-independent India. Though he is an expatriate academician taught in Chicago, he did not cut off his connections with his native Indian tradition, feelings and ethos. His poetic sensibility is a fusion of Western ideas and Indian national ethos. Being a highly talented and perceptive poet, he is quite responsive to his surroundings and has the realization of the East to apply to it the high voltage drama of life in the West. All his poetry unveils, in some way or the other, the poet's skeptical awareness of Indian myths and legends, Indian history and her glorious past, her varied customs and rituals, her integrated joint families, her religion and philosophy, for describing these all he uses irony, wit, understatement and has achieved a nut-like texture and grit in his poetry

Ramanujan chose to work and live in the United States, but his voluntary exile could not break him away from his native environment and roots. It could not curb his apparent Indian sensibility on which he laid much emphasis. This closing off from native rather became a boon for him and awakened his poetic

sensibility. It has enabled him to delve deep into India's past. His poems are combined with Eastern wisdom and Western skepticism. Being a voice of the Indian diaspora, his poetry is loaded with nostalgia for his lost motherland, but the Western enlightenment has sharpened his critical faculty. So, his portrayal of India is ironic rather than romantic.

The ironic mode is evident in many of his poems in his four volumes of poetry, one such is *The Striders*, which is an ambiguous piece which focuses on a picture of floating insects on water surface and suddenly switches over to prophets. The prophets undergo years of Tapa to attain Siddhi that may enable them to walk on water, and the dirty little bug is genetically programmed to perform this miracle the moment it is born. Ramanujan says: "No, not only prophets/walk on water. This bug sits/on a landslide of lights/and drowns eye-/deep/into its tiny strip/of sky" (CP 3). The theme of futile ritualism is ironically suggested here in Ramanujan's typical bathetic style, suffused with satiric laughter and a quiet tear for the vanity of human ambitions.

The impact of the ironic mode on Ramanujan's attitude to religion and philosophy is fairly perceptible in his early writings. His poem *Snakes* presents the ironic pictures of Hindu life and culture. The poem *Snakes* questions the reverence and devotion of the poet's mother towards a basketful of ritual cobras: "Mother gives them milk in saucers. /She watches them suck and bare the black-line/design etched on the brass of the saucer" (CP 4-5). The poem is successful in rendering of the memory of a childhood experience. However, the ironic sensibility of his mind is unmistakable.

Ramanujan's concerns of life is not contented in old Hindu rituals or superstitions. As his mind is conditioned by Western rationality, his ironic mind rebukes the new poets who still quote the old poets when he views the poem *A River*. His careful observation and ironic view makes him to put a harsh remark on the new poets who quote the old poets whose unscrupulousness does not notice the drowned pregnant woman with twins in her, but they are singing about flooded river:

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth. (CP 28-34)

There is subaltern irreverence in the poem that sees the river as a blind force of nature that may uproot homes and hearths in the fury of floods. The poet makes a departure by ironically contrasting the relative attitudes of the old and new Tamil poets whose callous mind unheeded the suffering people and animals. C.N. Srinath opines:

With the search for Hindu roots there is an accompaniment of the self-critical, ironic approach which brings out the inadequacies of the Hindu orthodox world to cope with the present day realities of modern life. (Srinath 29)

The ironic mode continues in some other poems in *Relations* regarding Hindu (ironically using the derogatory colonial spelling, Hindoo) Consciousness. Ramanujan is not a blind adulator of his inherited subconscious; rather he attempts a detached, objective view of the Hindu mind. Such a vision is discernible in the 'Hindoo' poems. These Hindoo poems unravel a deep ironic stance of the poet. Ramanujan's distrust of Hindu pacifism associated with the doctrine of ahimsa, nonviolence towards all creation, shows its affinity with the postcolonial mood of irreverence.

In *The Hindoo: he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either*, the persona is a religion-bound Hindu, prefers to be non-violent and passive in his life, as he believes in the doctrine of immortal soul. Every time the soul is reborn assuming a new form. Therefore, he believes in the possibility of all insects to be his ancestors in their previous births. He sees a fly or spider without the intention of hurting it as he takes them to be his grandmother or grandfather in their previous births and ironically explains the assumed forced gentleness of the Hindu:

Why, I cannot hurt a spider
 either, not even a black widow,
 for who can tell Who's Who?
 Can you? May it's once again my
 great swinging grandmother, (CP 3-7)

The poem, *The Hindoo: he reads his GITA and is calm at all events*, is a superb example of irony. The preaching of the Gita stresses self-control, compassion, and tranquility. This ideal of Gita resists the impact of both good and evil, joy and sorrow in an equal spirit. In the poem, the persona reads the Gita but is unable to keep the spirit of wisdom and equanimity: "I do not marvel/when I see good and evil: I just work (CP 79). The poem brings out the two contending sides of Hinduism in the speaker - one the non-involvement, "yet I come unstuck/and stand apart" the other, a superior sense of detachment, "I do not marvel/ when I see good and evil" (CP 79). Ramanujan's ironic intent is not on Hinduism or on the sacred scripture, but against those Hindus who do not realize the cowardice behind their pacifism. He satirises the outward placidity of the Hindus that hides their past wounds and humiliations of defeat.

Obviously, this pretense of high seriousness involves many risks that can spell the death of the instincts. The worst form of risk is a debilitating sense of guilt as an ugly inheritance which is very well

illustrated in the poem *The Hindoo: the only risk*. The poem tells us about that the near impossibility of keeping the heart's simple given beat in face of a neighbour's striptease or a friend's suicide or of keeping one self away from the kitchen knife which is needed "to maim oneself or carve up wife/and child" (CP 90). Active response involves the only risk of heartlessness. Ramanujan's whetted irony at those Hindus who are biased and cowardly is reiterated in the poem. Being well-versed in the Gita, the persona is afraid of handling a kitchen knife, as he may be tempted to maim himself or his wife or the child. But ironically, he never takes any risk in getting three, square meals a day. He prefers to involve himself in everything of common interest, even in the dead street dog, but he is frightened to be caught dead at sea, battle, riot, adultery or hate. Thus the poem takes a harsh dig at the persona's pacifism and passivity.

A Hindoo To His Body emphasizes the unfailing significance of body as well as of soul for the human beings. Being a tradition-bound, the Hindu, by temperament, the persona does not believe in the cultivation of the body at the cost of the soul. His inclination is towards the ennoblement of the soul, and a pious union with the Divine is their ultimate longing in their life. The poet regards the body as "pursuing presence" (CP 40) in the sense that it has the capacity to be reborn again and again. Every time man rejects the old and decaying body, he assumes a new one, hence it is pursuing. However, quite contrary to the view of Ramanujan, the Hindus do not make themselves captive in the love of body to be pursued and cherished. Instead, they believe firmly in the fourfold Hindu scheme of one's duty --Dharma Artha, Kama and Moksha. Among these, Moksha is believed to be the culmination and a desirable ideal of human life. According to Hindu religion Moksha is basically liberation of the soul from the cycle of bodily births and the ultimate unification with the Brahma, the highest and absolute Truth.

Conventions of Despair is the another poem which reveals Ramanujan's ironic view of his culture that binds him to remain a downright conventional Hindu. The poem begins in the midst of an argument that has created an upsetting tussle in the poet's post-colonial psyche, as neither he is willing to adopt the values of modernism, imposed by Western culture, nor does he venerate everything related to asceticism, indicating his questioning view of Hindu culture. The awareness of the contemporary reality has made the poet skeptical of its fashionable attitudinizing and intellectual patronizing that is associated with the post-colonial Brown Sahebs. It is the new culture colonisation that pricks him to remark: "But, sorry, I cannot unlearn/conventions of despair/They have their pride. (CP 34)

He cannot unlearn conventions of despair as he considers them as part of the game called life. The hardcore truth about the Hindus is that they are prone to sorrow and suffering, to the ways of prayers and penance, to the practice of tapasya and meditation. Hence, the commitment follows in the most commented upon lines: "I must seek and will find/my particular hell only in my Hindu mind" (CP 34).

This ethic of responsibility in a way is related with inescapable determinism. The quantum of punishment in a sinner's present birth is decided according to the proportion to his sins accumulating since past lives. Therefore, while stating, my particular hell, Ramanujan is fully aware of the magnitude of suffering due to his accumulated sins. His ironic acceptance of Hindu tradition and his revisionist approach to the inherited faith have been highlighted by the use of the lower capital "h" in Hindu. The use of the modal must and will unravel the fact that the poet is unable to avoid his predicament.

Ramanujan's perspective has enabled him to face other layers of his particular hell in the rest of the poem. Without making himself captive to the rigours of an ascetic life, the poet is desirous to undergo experiences of a normal man. He is not willing to exchange the present for some dreamy future –“the theory of a peacock -feathered future” (CP 35), as he puts it. Not that he is indifferent to the afflictions of life, but he accepts physicality:

No, no give me back my archaic despair:
It's not obsolete yet to live
in this many-lived lair
of flesh, this flesh. (CP 35)

The most striking thing in the above-mentioned excerpt is his firm solution to have a full life. He has discovered his native conventions which can be meaningful not in the immediate present but only in the literary past which is available in the act of translation and creation. Hence the predicament: “must translate and turn till I blister and roast” (CP 34), is true of his creative urge.

An irreverent exposure of Hindu godism is given in the poem *Prayers to Lord Murugan* and that too the result of his east west encounter. In the last poem of this volume, the poet appears to some extent despondently preoccupied with some Hindu attitudes. It is a poem of self-doubt like some of his Virsaiva poems that he had translated. The poem displays the fact that Ramanujan's critical attitude to Hinduism is a conscious revolt caused by his exposure to subaltern ethos. He has used the ironic mode of Vacanakaras to analyse the modern situation of a wounded India. Lord Murugan is the ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love, represented as a six-faced god with twelve hands. The poet is sad to observe the present mode of prayers that has lost the huge vitality of Lord Murugan. The poem ironically brings out how the post-colonial people have withdrawn from war-like Hinduism. His regret over the loss of Hindu vitality is explicit in the very beginning of the poem when he remarks: “when will orange banners burn/among blue trumpet flowers and the shade/of trees/waiting for lightnings?” (CP 113). The lightning is waited for as a sign of divine revelation. There is no animation at the sacrificial altar of the Lord. The people do not regard prayer as an instrument of purushartha as it does not involve any devotional content in

itself. The following lines highlight this incurable degeneration: “Lord of headlines,/help us read/the small print[...]/Lord of answers,/cure us at once/of prayers” (CP 116-117).

Now prayer has become a burden, a disease causing uneasiness and meek pacifism of the Hindu mind. The post-colonial walking-dead have forgotten the vitality of Lord Murugan mentioned in the poem variously as the Lord of green/growing things, the Lord of great changes and small/cells, the Lord of the spoor of the tigress, the Master of red bloodstains, the Lord of the twelve right hands, the Lord of headlines, the Lord of the sixth sense, the Lord of solutions, the Lord of the last-born, the Lord of lost travelers, and the Lord of answers. Such vitality rediscovered may lift Hindu India from the mires of despair and disillusionment of the post-colonial age.

The most commonly read poem of the collection *Relations* is *Obituary* which recalls and reflects the mourning of the poet on the death of his father. At the same time, the poet ironically comments on the Hindu rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead. Though reflectively the poem is a remembrance of the dead father, its outer ironic mode gives it new meanings. The father’s death does not seem to come as a traumatic experience as the poet ironically talks about the legacy that the poor father has left behind. The legacy is of a destitute land: “dust/on a table full of papers, /left debts and daughters, /a bedwetting grandson” (CP 111).

Besides, the poem exhaustively includes “one annual ritual” (CP 112), which refers to the Hindu death rites to be performed annually on the anniversary of the departed. It is in the poetic fusion of the personal and the impersonal that the essential concern of the poet can be best seen. He has succeeded to a large extent in linking tradition and modernism and thereby achieves a sense of universality. The linear progression of the detail which refers to the changed mother creates an unforgettable impact on us particularly in view of the miserable, solitary and sad life of a Hindu widow. The pathos inherent in the old man’s life is tinged with immaculate irony: “Being the burning type, /he burned properly/at the cremation” (CP 111).

The father’s physical burning at the cremation refers to traditional death rites of the Hindus. An orthodox Hindu believes that physically burning properly fulfills all the temporal and terrestrial wishes and longings of the father, and he attains mukti or salvation. The poem highlights a typical infrastructure of the orthodox Hindu culture. The other image ironically indicates to a candle that burns at both ends. It refers to one who lives lavishly beyond one’s means. This idea has been corroborated through the reference to the debts as the father’s legacy. The father’s legacy thus transforms into a metaphor for all the ills that post-colonial India was heir to.

Ramanujan's skeptical involvement with Hindu myths and legends, gods and goddesses with ironic intention is revealed in the poems like *No Amnesiac King*, *A Minor Sacrifice* in the third volume *Second Sight*.

The state of amnesia of the king Dushyanta is stated ironically in the poem *No Amnesiac King*. The story narrates the tragic but happy love-story of king Dushyanta and Shakuntala. The cause of the King's amnesia is the curse given by Durvasa rishi to Shakuntala who ignored his presence at her door. Consequently the King could not recognize Shakuntala in his court. Her ruffled condition could not move the amnesiac King as she had lost the wedding ring gifted to her by the King while she was bathing in a river. A fish had engulfed that ring. That was later caught by a fisherman and sent to the royal cook who cut it open and amazingly found the ring. The ring was restored to the King that caused the recovery of the king of all his lost memory, at the same time causing repentance. This ancient tale retold by Ramanujan creates few meanings according to his mode: "One cannot wait any more in the back/of one's mind for that conspiracy [. . .]so one can cut straight with the royal knife/to the ring waiting in the belly,/and recover at one stroke all lost memory" (CP 126).

The poet suddenly shifts from this mythological reference to his own wife whom he cannot forget even for a moment, particularly when she goes out to the market place to buy fish. Therefore, the poet concludes that in this age, no man has the luck of such an amnesiac king. Ramanujan has imbued this ancient legend with a modernistic sense of despair where the world is too much with us, and there is no leisure to "forget cocktail glasses and dry women" (CP 126).

The next poem which critically looks at ancient myths is *A Minor Sacrifice*. The poem in five parts relates the old story of Raja Parikshit and his son Janmejaya. Raja Parikshit was cursed of his death by snakebite because he killed a snake and his son vows to take revenge as: "till snakes of every stripe/begin to fall/through the blazing air/into his altar fires" (CP 144). This mythical tale is followed by a childhood memory. Ramanujan mentions the killing of a poisonous scorpion by his uncle to save his little son Gopu. After seeing its poisonous head, the children at once became interested in witchcraft in order to eliminate all scorpions. According to Shivana, to do so, they will have to please the twelve-handed god of scorpions with one hundred live grasshoppers caught on a new moon Tuesday. On Wednesday morning, Shivana is reported to have been admitted to the hospital because of "some strange twitching disease" (CP 148). The curse of the hundred tortured grasshoppers falls on Shivana who provoked the innocent boys for wicked sacrifices in witchcraft. After the death of Shivana the uncle wonders: "Did you know, that Shivana,/he clawed and kicked the air/all that day, that new moon Tuesday,/like some bug,/on its back?" (148). The poem thus suggests that Ramanujan is keenly aware of certain characteristic Indian social experience. There is a clear dig at sacrifices for the propitiation of various gods. Moreover, the manner in which the poem ends, suggests that senseless violence is self-destructive.

Ramanujan's ironic, questioning vision of India's postcolonial milieu is reflected in several poems in the volume *The Black Hen*. These poems include *Mythologies 1*, *Mythologies 2* and *Mythologies 3*.

Ramanujan's ironical scrutiny of the Hindu myths, legends and folktales culminates in these poems. The first two Mythology poems are remarkable for their juxtaposition of the fantasy of the myth with the fact of the poet's real self. All the same, in these poems, he tries to incorporate some sort of prayer motif as that of a true devout Hindu at the last stage of his life. These poems evince the sense of death and not the fear of death. Myths are not celebratory in an epic mode, but invocatory for a pensive mood.

In *Mythologies 1*, the poet evokes the myth of Krishna and Putna. With the intention of killing the baby Krishna, Kansa sent Putna, the she-demon to Gokul, the abode of Yashoda, to feed the baby from her poison-coated nipple. Putana flew to Krishna's cradle and lifted him up to suck her poisoned milk. But the divine baby, envisioning her heinous conspiracy, drew out her life-blood by sucking her breast and thus put an end to her life. The poet's precise depiction of the myth is remarkable: "The child took her breast/in his mouth and sucked it right out of her chest" and "She changed, undone by grace,/from deadly mother to happy demon,/found life in death" (CP 221).

At the time of her death, Putna appeared in her true self and thus attained salvation by the Lord himself. In his despair, the poet feels that life has poisoned his self. He is desirous to be resurrected in a new life, ensconced in salvation. This honest and sincere prayer of the poet is, in reality, the prayer of every Hindu: "O Terror with a baby face,/suck me dry. Drink my venom. /Renew my breath" (CP 221).

In *Mythologies 2*, the poet highlights the myth of Lord Vishnu as Narisimha, the killer tarnished the tyrannical king Hiranyakashyapu. The poem sketches ironically the perfect boon as the clever machinations of the modern man. He exposes how the best laid plans of mice and men go wrong when God delivers justice:

When the clever man asks the perfect boon:

not to be slain by demon, god, or by beast . . .

Come now come soon,

Vishnu, man, lion, neither and both, to hold

him in your lap to disembowel his pride

with the steel glint of bare claws at twilight. (CP 226)

While narrating the tale, the poet puts his own honest prayer for a double vision and for removing his doubt. This prayer alludes to his maturing vision that provides the poet with the capacity to foresee the

inner and the outer side of things real. This precise juxtaposition of the mythical content with the real is a message to modern rationalists who see only one dimension of life.

In *Mythologies 3*, the poet dramatizes a situation in which a young female-votary of Lord Shiva refuses the advances of her new groom. Ritualism has made her frigid: “Keep off when I worship Siva. /Touch me three times, and you’ll never/see me again” (CP 228).

Even while lying on the nuptial bed, she utters Om, Om with every breath. While she is offering her prayers to Lord Shiva, her husband makes every possible effort to touch her. But on doing so, she fled his hand as she would a spider. However, soon enough she threw away her modesty, and thereby experienced a new birth -the bliss of married life: “She saw Him then, unborn, form of forms, the Rider, /His white Bull chewing cud in her backyard” (CP 228).

Ramanujan’s ironic juxtaposition of taboos and desire exhibits the difference between the old world and the new. He has succeeded in establishing the co-existence of body with the soul. By giving a modernistic touch to divine love, he has humanized an old fable. The virile persuasions of the young groom cure the frigidity of the newly wedded female votary of Lord Shiva Bull in her backyard is a remarkable double entendre conjoining sacred and profane love. Ramanujan’s message to the post-colonial moral police that wields the stick of tradition is that sex is as important as faith because it is the very heart of creation. Denial of desire is no godliness; it is a kind of neurosis.

In style and thought, in experience and its treatment, Ramanujan’s entire poetic corpus exudes an identifiable ethos of his native culture *i.e.* Hindu culture. But his ironical vision of the Hindu way of life is quite prominent in these poems. He has employed irony, wit and understatement to express his views and has achieved a nut-like texture and grit in his poetry. In his own way he displays a unique synthesis of Indian sensibility and Western liberalism, and his poetry has given new gusto and vigour to contemporary Indian English Literature.

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