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A General Estimate of Ramanujan as a Poet

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A.K.Ramanujan shot into prominence with the publication of his first volume of verses The Striders in 1966, and it was followed by his second anthology Relations: Poems 1971. The Striders is a veritable tour de force, and a further growth in stature, in maturity, and in technical skill is to be seen in the second volume. **Taqi Ali Mirza** does not agree with **Natarajan's** assessment, who, in his introduction to Ramanujan's poetry in the Quest, Special Number (1972), suggests that the promise of the first book has not been fulfilled in the second. If, at all, one were to find fault with Ramanujan, it would be for the thinness of his output. This slenderness may be attributed to his fastidiousness and his meticulous attention to the aesthetic aspects of his work. Indeed, today he is regarded as one of the 'big three' in Indian English poetry – the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das just as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao, are the big three of Indian English novel. He is a bi-lingual, even a tri-lingual poet, for he also writes both in Kannada and Tamil. He is a genuine poet who has something worthwhile to say, and he knows how to say it, both in English and in his native tongue. The secret of his success lies in his not disowning his Indian inheritance, despite his long sojourn abroad. His poetry has an unmistakable authenticity of tone and treatment.

Ramanjuna's poetry says **Paul Vergheese** expresses an Indian sensibility sharpened and conditioned by Western education. This interpenetration of the East and the West is most clearly seen in poems like Prayers to Lord Murugan. The poet has learned to stand at a distance or across a culture and look at things Indian with amused detachment. This traditional-modern or Indian-Western conflict or active engagement imparts the requisite dynamic force or tension to his poetry and raises it to the level of highest art.

Ramanujan's eyes do take an a merry twinkle as he surveys the Indian scene from across the Atlantic, as do those of the grown-ups when they fall upon their children at play. Even things considered most sacred receive an ironic, bemused treatment. For example in Obituary an average and familiar day-to-day transaction at the provision store is dramatized with cosmic possibilities for reasons which remain somewhat mysterious to an Indian reader. *The poet's irony is all-pervasive. Most of the poems about his family are tinged with irony; "Still Life" captures this irony at its most static:*

When she left me
After lunch, I read
For a while
But I suddenly wanted
To look again
And I saw the half-eaten
Sandwich,
Bread,
Lettuce and salami
All carrying the shape
Of her bite.

Irony is dominated by good humour in "Self-Portrait"

I resemble everyone
But myself, and sometimes see
In shop-windows
Despite the well-known laws
Of optics,
The portrait of a stranger,
Date unknown
Often signed in a corner
By my father

It becomes pungent and sardonic in "Warning"

Poverty is not easy to bear.
The body is not easy to wear
So beware I say to my children
Unborn, lest they choose to be born.

"The confessional note in the poems about close relations, mother, father, grandfather, wife and children gains its aesthetic validity from his ironic stance" (**K.A. PANIKAR)** *Love poems for a Wife: I and II,* are elaborate studies in this vein. History juxtaposes scenes from the past revealing the pieces of skeleton in the cupboard.

When the great aunt died, her two
Daughters, one dark one fair,
Unknown each to the other
Alternately picked their mother's body clean
Before it was cold
Or the eyes were shut,
Of diamond ear-rings

Bangles, anklets, the pin

In her hair,

The toe-rings from her wedding.

Satyanarayan Singh rightly points out that the poet reacts, "strongly to certain aspects of Indian life and situation, but his comments are never direct or explicit. His criticism exists in the way he designs and constructs his images on themes of power-mad politicians, of sensation loving poets, and hypocritical society men." The quality of present day politics is embodied in the image of the eater who finally gets present day politics is embodied in the image of the eater who finally gets eaten up: The strong devour the weak and the appetitive for blood leads up to where the victor-victim bleeds and thus continues the lurid game of power politics. *The river* is a dig at the poets, who will sing only of the event that tickles them most, unmindful of what it means to others-to whom poetry is no more than a form of what it means to others – to summer is just a trickle-too dry and uninspiring-but a river in floods is an exciting prospect.

The river has water enough

To be poetic

About only once a year.

Ramanujan's poetry is rooted in the family. He is ever remembering with nostalgia the various members of his family, as well as various objects connected with his early life in India. *His interior landscape is peopled with a host of familiar figures and objects.* His poetry shows how an Indian poet in English can derive strength from going back to his roots. In poem after poem, Ramanujan goes back to his childhood memories and experiences of life in South India. "Recollected in adult tranquility abroad, these memories and experiences, indelibly etched on the impressionable mind of a sensitive, growing boy, now pulsate into life. The memory of the day when a great aunt dies, of another when a basketful of cobras come into the house, and a host of such other felt experiences give a certain immediacy to his poets." **(M.K.Naik)**.

The poet's self is the 'theatre' in which are staged a host of incidents from the past, and across which move a number of personae like his grandparents, mother, father, cousins, wife etc. In *Small Scale Reflections on a Great House,* is a staged the history of the great family house, and we witness the comedy of a number of strange personae coming to the house never to go back, or to return to it soon, even if they by chance happen to go out. In the last stanza humour mingles with pathos as is staged the drama of the return of the nephew who went out of the great house, won laurels in the war, and then returned to it as a corpse on a particularly 'chatty evening'. Love Poem for a Wife, I, stages a powerful' psychic drama' through a "You and I" conflict. There is a criss-cross of memories which adequately covey's the intensity of the poet's yearning for emotional fulfillment in family relationship. In this way, the family figures and objects associated with his childhood become the signs and symbols-the alphabet-for conveying the poet's emotions. "It is perhaps an unconscious awareness of this quality that is responsible for the virtues. P**arthasarthy** singles out for praise in Ramanujan's poetry – the achievement of unexpected effects by employing familiar speech rhythms, clichés, and slang."

Family is one of the central metaphors in Ramanujan's poetry, but the family itself is viewed in its historical context. While Ezekiel is a poet who lives in India and is committed to the Indian environment, Ramanujan living in the U.S.A for over years looks across an alien culture and a vast ocean, to find his roots in Indian myth and tradition. That is why his separation from his immediate Indian environment has been a blessing. In his case apparent "alienation from the immediate environment" has meant, "continuity with an older ideal", i.e. with Indian historical tradition. There is always the "presence of the past" in the poetry; he is not of those who hope for a future without organically remembering the past. His poetry ceases to be the "anthropological oddity" of the unthinking scoffers. As M. Sivaram Krishna points out, "History for Ramanujan, contemporizes itself largely through the intricate network of familiar relations-with the figures of the father and mother dominating the interior landscape, a parental authoritarianism which atrophies, ironically, the poet's marital relations."

From personal experience the poet constantly passes on to a depiction of shared or collective experience. He seeks comfort in a communal past; he constantly goes back to India's common heritage of myth and tradition. The pathos of the life of the educated Indian today, torn by opposing pulls and conflicts acquires a tragic dimension as it is viewed against India's tragic past, and her equally tragic present. His poetry reflects the predicament of one who, while intellectually convinced of the need for relating himself to history through tradition is exposed to a milieu- the contemporary Indian one-in which the main modes of the continuity of tradition-myth, literature, family-are largely sterile. There is, in short, an acutely unnerving perception of the near-complete demythologized reality of the present- a perception which cripples creativity as in *Prayer to Lord Murugan.*

We eat legends and leavings,
Remember the ivory, the apes
The peacocks we sent in the Bible
To Solomon, the medicines for smallpox
The similes
For muslin; wavering snakeskin,
A cloud of steam
Ever-rehearsing astronauts,
We purify and return
Our urine
To the circling body
And burn our faces
For fuel to reach the moon
Through the sky behind
The navel

Still he is determined to seek his identity in India's past, "I must seek and will find my particular hell only, in my Hindu mind," the immediate consequence of this is to discover that the native conventions can be meaningful not in the immediate present but only in the literary past which at best is available only in the act of 'translation', not of 'creation'. Hence his translations from Kannada and Tamil are expressions of his quest for identity which he can find neither in a foreign environment, nor in the immediate Indian social environment, but which he hopes to find in the literary past of his country. Thus his original creative writings and his translations express a 'unified sensibility'.

List most other new Indian English poets, Ramanujan also uses the short line, sometimes even as short as one or two syllables. Almost every line in his poetry is easily spoken in one effort of the breath. Often he uses lines which break off abruptly, leaving the reader to complete the sense. More often than not his lines are accent based and colloquial. He no doubt uses free verse, but musical effects are created by the use of internal rhyme. In almost every poem there is a subtle blending of sound with sense: the rhythm and movement of his lines change according to the requirements of thought and emotion. In "The Hindu: He doesn't hurt a Fly or a Spider either", the opening lines are sprightly and their light-winged, almost jovial, lone depends upon end of line and internal rhyming (why-fly, spider-either). In Prayer to Lord Murugan the serenity and silence of the concluding prayer contrast sharply with the excited, almost feverish, pitch of voice and the movement of images with which the god is sought to be invoked in the opening prayer (garlands turning like chariot-wheels, glinting beaks, burning banners, etc.). Ramanujan's deft craftsmanship and metrical skill remains unequalled in Indian English poetry.

To conclude with **Taqi Ali Mirza's** assessment of Ramanujan's achievement, "His work bears the impress of all great poetry- turning the ephemeral into the permanent, articulating the predicament of a whole people in verse which, at one and the same time, is charged with emotion and has the detachment of great art. His 'particular hell' is our common heritage. Almost all critics writing on Ramanujan's poetry have stressed, with varying degrees of emphasis, the element of familial relationship in his poetic consciousness, and have tried to make it the principal source of his inspiration. But what many of them seem to miss is that this element, though apparently so predominant, is only part of the larger mental and emotive make-up which constitutes of Ramanujan's poetic sensibility. His sense of history, his projection of individual experience as part of a social milieu, is so acute that he is able always to keep a delicate balance between the ephemeral and the permanent." **R.Parthasarthy** is closer to the mark when he says that Ramanujan's poetry is the product of a specific culture', and that his real greatness lies in his ablity to translate this experience into the terms of another culture'. It is at this point that Ramanujan's poetic craftsmanship comes into play, and his handling of the English idiom with consummate skill enables him to give to what is a rather limited and insular experience, a widely-accepted, universal connotation. This mutation of a familiar and 'communal' experience into an authentic and sensitive poetic language is so natural that there is no hint, as there is in the poetry of

many an Indian poet, of 'selling' Indian culture to the foreign reader. The thinness of his poetic output is accounted for by his fastidiousness as an artist."

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