

# Indian Tradition and Modernity in A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry

## Abstract

Ramanujan is one of the leading poets in modern English poetry who was brought up in a multilingual environment and mastered the languages like Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Sanskrit and English. He was remarkably successful in combining the native tradition with English language. Though he was influenced by western lifestyle, he could not withdraw himself from the traditions of Hinduism and its cultural values. He makes the Indian traditions of family life, rural India, its superstitions and way of life and Indian landscape the subject of his poems. His personal experience can be seen as the basis of most of his poems. His poems show his strong awareness of the requirement of modernity. The poems of Ramanujan are like a mirror in which one can see the face of Indian tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** Indian Tradition, Modernity, Poverty, Narrative, Life, Culture.

### Introduction

**Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan** is one of the leading figures in modern poetry in English. Though he was an expatriate academician teaching in Chicago, he was deeply rooted in Indian myths and culture. As compared to Nissim Ezekiel, who lived in India and was committed to Indian atmosphere, Ramanujan living in the U.S.A. for thirty years, looks across an alien culture and a vast ocean but he finds a vision of reality in Indian tradition and culture. He has brought out two collections, *The Striders* (1966) and *Relations* (1972). With 'The Striders', A.K. Ramanujan took his place in the selected brand of Indian Indo-English poets. It won him the Poetry Book Society Recommendation award. The chief feature of his poetry is his great love for Indian myth, history, heritage, and environment. We find the influence of Hindu Heritage in Ramanujan's poetry. His memories are in the specific society of the Tamil Brahmins. His poetry presents the conflict between Indian ethos which is natural to him and the western ethos which he acquired in U.S.A. between East and West tradition and modernity. Ramanujan's poetry, describing the harmonization of tradition and modernity, universalizes certain aspects of Indian background.

### Objective of the Study

To bring out the combination of Indian tradition in the works of A.K. Ramanujan and his portrait of the Indian scene in his poetry.

### Main Text

Living in the U.S.A. Ramanujan could not get rid of his Indian, say Hindu, consciousness which was molded by the historic past. The title poem *Striders* in the very first volume presents through a sculptural image of the New England Water insect the poet's self which strikes a balance between the present and the past:

*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.*

(*Striders*)

His poem "Conventions of Despair" is again a protest poem. This poem instructs us to be itinerant and modern to fit in the current or contemporary world and to stay away from the bitter sense of anguish and dissatisfaction.

*Yes, I know all that. I should be modern.  
Marry again. See strippers at the Tease.  
Touch Africa. Go to the movies.*

(Conventions of Despair)

When a poet feels lonely and tries to overcome it or protest, he gives voice to his feelings. The sense of loss is clearly peeping out through the following lines:

*"The Hindu consciousness is pervasive.  
I must seek and will find  
My particular hell in my Hindu mind"*

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*(Collected Poems 34)*

Ramanujan's poetry is an expression of Indian sensibility, sharpened and nourished by Western education and environment. He himself writes in this connection: "English and disciplines (linguistics: anthropology) give me my outer forms – linguistic, metrical, logical, and other such ways of shaping experience; and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil Classics, and folklore give me my substance, my inner forms, images, and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where."<sup>1</sup> His success as a poet lies in the fusion of Indian sensibility with his American experiences.

Ramanujan portrays the Indian scene from across the Atlantic with complete artistic detachment and irony. Certain aspects of Indianness that he portrays have a universal significance. The old ragpicker in Chicago, where he lived for three decades could have been in Mysore, where he studied or Madras from where his parents came. His famous poem Chicago Zen juxtaposes his present in Chicago with his past in India. He feels at home in America, but his responses are personal and they are unlike those of Americans. His naturalization in America could never sever him from his Indian roots and sensibility. Following Quoted lines justify his attachment to India:

*Watch your step. Sight may strike you  
blind in unexpected places.  
The traffic light turns orange  
on 57th and Dorchester, and you stumble,  
you fall into a vision of forest fires,  
enter a frothing Himalayan River,  
rapid, silent.  
On the 14th floor,  
Lake Michigan crawls and crawls*

*(Chicago Zen)*

The poet says that when you are in places like Chicago, everything is new for you. Beginning from people, culture, atmosphere, things, food, etc. are new and unexpected for you. Moreover, things are unexpected at such a level that for a moment, you will be blind and mad. Here, the poet confesses the reality of living in a foreign land.

After this, there is a sudden change in the poem. He becomes confused and talks about Himalayan River and lake Michigan of U.S.A. In short, there is constant change in the thought of the poet because he is confused between Indian culture and American culture. Ramanujan attained total naturalization with the American ethos, but he never severed himself from his Indian roots. Indianness was a part of his consciousness. The opening lines of poem arrest our attention.

*I know, you told me,  
your nightsoil and all  
your city's, goes still  
warm every morning  
in a government  
lorry, drippy (you said)  
but punctual, by special  
arrangement to the municipal  
gardens to make the grass  
grow tall for the cows  
in the village, the rhino  
in the zoo, and the oranges  
plump and glow, till  
they are a preternatural  
orange.*

*(Death and Good Citizen)*

In this poem, Ramanujan reveals his born affinity with India. He explores India's common heritage of myth and tradition. His predicament is tragic when he realizes that the perennial springs of the continuity of tradition, myth, literature, family have become sterile. He is aware of the decadent social milieu of contemporary India. He is pained at the near complete de-mythicized reality of the present - a perception which paralyses creativity as in *Prayer to Lord Murugan*. Ramanujan seeks the blessings of Lord Murugan to sharpen his sensibilities and deeper love towards fellow human beings in his poem 'Prayers to Lord Murugan'. Lord Murugan is regarded as the Lord bestowing both plenty and fertility, in the Dravidian religious tradition. The poet has described the attributes of Lord Murugan in the following verses.

*Unlike other gods*

*You find work  
For every face,  
And made  
Eyes at only one  
Woman. And your arms  
Are like faces with proper  
names.*

*(Prayers to Lord Murugan)*

That humanity is one family remains an important tenet of Hinduism. Ramanujan is fascinated by the ideals of Hinduism and has presented the manifold facets of it. He has acknowledged that some traditions in it have outlived their utility, and now they have only a sentimental value. Ramanujan seeks his identity neither in America, nor in the immediate present but in the mythical and literary past of India.

Ramanujan highlighted the Indian scene of marriage tradition. There are different traditions in North and South India. If we do not follow the tradition, it always remains unfulfilled relationship throughout the life.

"In India, there are various practices in North and South to eat with a person not having received Brahmin initiation, to eat with one's wife, to eat food prepared the previous day; to marry the daughter of the maternal uncle and paternal aunt."<sup>2</sup>

When children visit their maternal uncle and paternal aunt, they share their childhood playing on swing, climbing on the tree, collecting fruits, playing in the mud. After sharing their childhood when they become young, there is a possibility to marry but in modern period there are some changes in tradition and culture. In the poem, "Looking for a cousin on a Swing" there are problems regarding marriages among the youngsters. This picture of Indian scenario is reflected through the poem.

*Now she looks for the swing  
In cities with fifteen suburbs  
And tries to be innocent  
About it.*

*(Looking for a cousin on a Swing)*

Here innocent has sensitive meaning used in paradoxical way. In Indian remote villages many children expend their childhood with their cousins but unfortunately, they cannot transform into marriages. The Indian tradition of marriage is aptly described in the poem. Ramanujan's Indian sensibility finds its superb expression in poems dealing with familial relationships. Family is the central metaphor in his absolute best poetry.

M.K. Naik remarked that "A.K. Ramanujan's poetry has its origin in the past and is deeply rooted in his memory."<sup>3</sup>

He treats familial relationships with objectivity and detachment. He communicates his childhood memories and familial relationships in his poems which abound in the images of big trees, mynahs, snakes, Madurai, a Delhi sundial etc. In polished and refined English, Ramanujan conjures up from the remote realm of memory vivid images of his childhood and familial relationships.

Ramanujan views family in the historical context. Living in isolation from his native roots, he feels an intense yearning for seeking his identity in familial connection. He is so thoroughly Indian that his dead body will not assimilate with dust and will not flower into Jasmine and fruits in the alien soil. His Hindu body will accept only burning:

Now she looks for the swing  
in the cities with the fifteen suburbs  
and it tries to be innocent  
about it  
Now she looks for the swing  
in the cities with the fifteen suburbs  
and it tries to be innocent  
about it

*My tissue will never graft,  
will never know new print,  
never grow in a culture,  
or be mold and compost  
for jasmine, eggplant  
and the unearthly perfection  
of mimical oranges."  
(Death and Good Citizen)*

His poem "Obituary" is usually a tribute to the person who has passed away, featuring the high point of his life. This poem highlights three Indian scenes, cremation ceremony of father, daughter treated as debts and poverty. The cremation of father was completed

according to the customs of Hindu culture. Chittaranjan Misra feels that, "in spite of his constant exposure to American belief and culture, he has consistently written about India-not as an obsession, but as restricting a person's (Indian) past and nourishing them the same as insulted from the ideological oppositions that affect the time and space in which his text is written."<sup>4</sup>

*Father, when he passed on,  
left dust  
on a table of papers,  
left debts and daughters,*

(Obituary)

In a South Indian family both debts and daughters are treated alike. Daughters are born debts to be settled only in marriages. That is the destiny of the females. Now-a-days we find a changed kind of destiny. Can we say the naming of a grandson after his grandfather denoted the continuity of the cycle of life? In the busy modern world, everyone lives by chance and luck. Even the crucial event of naming a child is also by chance.

*a bedwetting grandson  
named by the toss  
of a coin after him,*

(Obituary)

That too is not due to affection but "by chance". The value of a dead is usually estimated by the properties he leaves behind. They are the deciding factors of the funeral ceremonies. Here the dead father's possessions are:

*a house that leaned  
slowly through our growing  
years on a bent coconut  
tree in the yard*

(Obituary)

The narrator exposes how poverty works in the family. There are large numbers of problems regarding money. Father has done nothing for the development of the family. He left unmarried daughters, bedwetting grandson and changed mother. His birth and death are meaningless. In the meaningless of father's life, poet searches meaning that is the two-line obituary in local newspaper. For common man two lines obituary may be a great achievement. As the narrator says:

*everything he didn't quite  
manage to do himself,  
like his caesarian birth*

.....  
*and his death by heart  
failure in the fruit market*

(Obituary)

The preserver of life is at the same time the destroyer. This dichotomy is well established in his poem 'A River'. Men may come and men may go, but the world remains the same. Moral man is insignificant before the immortal and all-powerful nature.

This poem depicts the picture of the river Vaikaki flowing through Madurai in both summer and rainy seasons. It also arouses our pity and catharsis through the image of a dead pregnant woman who has twins in womb.

*one pregnant woman  
and a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.*

(A River)

Ramanujan feels that no one speaks in verse about the terrible and pitiable loss of life and property caused by the floods. The destiny of human life is always decided by the unpredictable 'Nature'. The struggle for life starts even before the practical and actual birth of a baby. The still born kicks "the walls" as a sign of survival.

The poet manipulates his medium of poetry to express the destructive side. Ramanujan uses vivid details and images to paint the realistic picture of the riverbed showing its sand ribs.

*baring the sand ribs,  
straw and women's hair  
clogging the water gates  
at the rusty bars*

(A River)

He also gives a realistic description of the wet stones glisten like sleepy unmoving crocodiles and the dry stones like shaven water buffaloes lounging in the sun. It also shows the dryness, drabness, scantiness, and barrenness of the river.

“Small-scale reflections on a great house” is an outstanding poem reflecting declining tradition of joint Hindu family and losing its greatness into ruin. The “Great House” stands for the undivided joint Hindu family and the adjective “Great” appears to be ironical for there is nothing quite “great” about the house. These lines reflect the speaker’s reflections on ancestral house:

*Lame wandering cows from nowhere  
have been known to be tethered,  
given a name, encouraged  
to get pregnant in the broad day light  
of the street under the elders’  
supervision, the girls hiding  
behind windows with holes in them  
(Small-scale Reflections on a Great House)*

The poet focuses on Indian tradition of joint family, there are many scenes that reflect Indian visible scenes like pronating cows in broad daylight on the streets, watched by girls through the holes in the windows.

This poem unfolds the picture of Indian tradition and culture through the various images and incidents. Ramanujan’s remarkable achievement as modern Indian English poet was that he unfolds the reality of Indian tradition and culture without losing consciousness of being an Indian.

S.S Dulai says: “Ramanujan observes closely and often laments poignantly on the human corruption in contemporary India.”<sup>5</sup>

Ramanujan conjures up the conflict between east and west, between past and present, between tradition and modernity through vivid, concrete images. “Conventions of Despair” shows poets strong awareness of the requirement of modernity. For being modern or to follow the principles of modernity means that a man should marry again. He should have fondness for watching movies. He should participate in scientific age and should also try to do research on many things. He should support the nuclear test ban treaty. He should adopt artificial manners. After uttering a lot, the poet suddenly realizes that he has spoken too much. In the same poem, he accepts modernity like hell where the poet would be treated as ‘The marginal man’. He cannot part with his consciousness.

## Conclusion

Ramanujan’s poetic technique also evinces of the east and the west. He is a talented poet and skilled craftsman. His technical skill remains matchless in Indian English poetry. He translates his experiences into English idioms with consummate skills and matchless command. The techniques of Tamil and Kannada verse exercised great influences on his poetry. The word play, puns, inner rhymes, rhetorical devices, ironies, distanced neutrality of tone, understatement, compression, and elliptical progression of poems have similarities to his translations. This does not mean that Ramanujan is unaffected by his reading of Yeats, Eliot, and other moderns who have influenced him, but he is highly aware of the conventions, techniques, and structures of India verse and these have been used and transformed in his poetry.

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