

## A.K.Ramanujan As A Nostalgic Poet

**M. Sri Vidhya Thangalakshmi**

Asst. Prof. of English St. Johns' College, Palayamkottai, India

### Abstract

A.K. Ramanujan was an expatriate writer; his "Black Hen" collection contains variety of themes like art, love, war, displacement, pain, mythology and fear. By analyzing select poems from his collection it is unspoken that he was longing for his past and his homeland through his poems. This paper portrays A.K.Ramanujan as a Nostalgic Poet

**KEYWORDS:** Nostalgic, expatriate writer, homeland, mythology

"The Black Hen" was Ramanujan's fourth collection of poems. It was published posthumously in 1995. It contains a range of themes like art, love, war, displacement, pain, mythology and fear.

Nostalgic Analysis of A.K.Ramanujan's Poetry in the view of

- (i) Diasporic experiences
- (ii) Indianness
- (iii) Quest for identity
- (iv) Themes
- (v) Metaphor, symbolism and imagery.

(i) *Diasporic experiences in Ramanujan's Poetry :*

Diaspora means dispersion of people from their original homeland. The Diasporic writings which are also known as Expatriate writings or 'Immigrant writings' give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers when they are on the rack owing to the clashes of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves with new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most of the diasporic writers, immigration is not a delicious experience. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home, obsesses them which find expression, consciously or unconsciously, in their writings. Those who are longing for their homeland, culture, caste, language, and ethnicity form their nostalgic experience very strongly in their writings.

The world he migrates is presented as a loss of meaning through the separation of a self from the present condition. The poetic world he translates in his writings, offers healing by giving access to a world in which the self, and all its modes of feeling, doing and saying are always connected in a sense of migration because it restores continuity with the past; reciprocally, migration enlarges the life of the past by giving the solidarity self the need as opportunity to revive and sustain its transmissibility through his writings.

Migration represents the loss in Ramanujan's poems in several ways. His poems are his symptoms of distress in his solitary life. Because he considers that he alone is a community. For example in *The Interior landscape*, he explains that the world he had left behind haunts his memory, as guilt and emptiness.

...The waste land  
You have to pass through  
Is absence itself...  
Do you think that home will be sweet  
For the ones you behind ? (IL 5).

His poems suggest difficulties or sustaining a sense of relatedness to other people. They reveal a sense of estrangement even within the reduced family unit, as in several poems addressed to his wife. They also express a sense of alienation from his physical and cultural environment.

In Chicago it blows  
...  
Enemies have guns .  
Friends have doubts.  
Wives have lawyers.  
...  
Give daughters pills,  
learn karate.  
In Chicago,  
do not walk slow (CZ – 103).

In Ramanujan's poetry the migrated world appear meaningful only when it is related to the world migrated from in nostalgic double – focus. In the poem “Extended Family”

The dry chlorine water  
my only Ganges  
the naked Chicago bulb  
A cousin of the Vedic sun (CZ 9).

His poems express a sense of being trapped in the past deterministically bound to the shaping influence of family and parents.

But living  
Among relations  
bind the feet ( translated epigraph to relations 1971)

(ii) *Indianness in A.K.Ramanujan's Poetry :*

Indian writers are very much influenced by the Indian culture and customs, traditions. The writer also writes for Indian audience, so it has an Indian appeal, which is likable to all people. The writers also write for Non-Indian audiences, and to them the feature of indianness makes it exotic and gives a deep feeling and experience of real India.

Indianness is an element of the poem, which shows India through its language, imagery, sensibility or anything, which makes the Indian as 'Indian'. Indianness in a poem remains as a very remarkable character. Indianness can be defined in terms of what and how Indians are and what makes them what they are. It is also the depiction of Indian Culture. Thus “Indianness is the sum total of cultural patterns of India, deep rooted in ideas and ideas which form the minds of India” (Paul Vargese)

A.K.Ramanujan depicts the Hindu tradition of generation and the process of throwing the ashes in the river in the poem “The Obituary”

Being the burning type  
He burned property  
At the cremation (OY- 3).

In his poem “A River” – he talks about a river. A river itself is an Indian in there and location. The place is Madurai and particularly Vaigai River. The straw and women’s hair clogging the watergates, the stones like buffaloes and crocodiles are Indian images. The names of the cows taken by the flood, Gopi and Brinda are typically Indian. The main thing to state here is his poetic style bears Indian Sensibility.

In his poem Extended Family we can see Indianness (E.g)  
Yet like grandfather  
I bathe before the village crow... (AR – 2).

(iii) *Quest for Identity :*

To analyse this sub-title we can take A.K. Ramanujan’s Poem, *Self –Portrait*. When we read this poem we tend to think a lot about A.k.Ramanujan’s thoughts, feelings and reasons to search for his identity by writing his pathetic condition within 9 lines. By looking at the mirror, not mirror exactly, but a shop - window, the poet is seeing his image, in fact, the poet narrates he is looking at himself. He feels the loss of identity – who am I ? is the question arises from within.

He does not recognize himself and poses as a stranger. His looking at the window creates the picture of the portrait, like a painting of a stranger. It is obvious that when a painter paints, he would give the date to it. But here the date is missing. But the poet finds his father’s signature. The portrait of the stranger is prepared by his father. The poet’s parents are the artist, the creator of his portrait. His father has “signed in a corner” of the portrait but still he feels the loss of identity; he visualizes himself as an outsider and finds a stranger within him. His analysis here reveals his quest for identity in the strange land.

(iv) *Themes of his Poems :*

Nationalism is not a apt theme in A.K.Ramanujan’s Four collections. *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1986) and the posthumous publication, *The Black Hen* (1995). Here the point is, it should not misunderstand him as a patriotic poet, for his continuous remembrance of homeland in his writings. But they are all only remembrance and just longing for the past. He is interested in writing culture, nature and time without following any rhyme scheme.

Vinay Dharwadkar writes in his introduction that Ramanujan’s general interests were “human, history and society”. He states that his poetry focuses on the more abstract, impersonal and even trans-human aspects of temporality and historical process, but they remain inextricable from a humanistic conception of the past and the present, His poems may be considered as social poetry and his poems can be regarded as “memorable national portraits” of modern India.

History and the consciousness of the tragedy of India and of being an Indian are clearly portrayed in poems like *Compensation* and *The Last of the Princes*. Ramanujan’s historical sensibility is sharp and acute. It is projected in many of his poems. Familial experience is looked up with his historical consciousness. In poems which are basically historical, relations like father, mother, sisters, brothers, wife appear. In *The Last of the*

*Princes*, he narrates the fall of the Moghul Empire; highlighting both history and family. The depiction of the poverty and suffering of the royal family as it faces a crucial time. The history in this poem goes back to Aurangzeb's time. It was the Moghul dynasty. Here he depicts beautifully how the cunning policies of the English confused even the cunning Moghul Dynasty.

Themes of hybridity and transculturalism are the highlights of his two main poems *Second Sight and Astronomer*. *Astronomer* is an attempt to make sense of his father's seemingly contradictory image.

The poem *Chicago Zen* exemplifies the theme of transnationalism, in this poem he imagines himself as another hybrid image. In his poem *Self Portrait* the theme for quest for identity is discussed.

Most of his poems reveal his tension between being and world, about duality in relation to the past, about scrutinizing the self.

His poems deploy all the modernist poetic trappings, tension, irony, obscurity, fragmentation, montage like structure, ambivalence, imagistic and concrete.

(v) *Analyses of Metaphor, Symbolism and Imagery*::

*Metaphor* means a word or phrase used to show the literal meaning. *Symbolism* means use of symbols that is a person, an object, an event used to represent ideas. *Imagery* means usage of images that is using an impression from that produces pictures in the minds of people reading or listening.

In the poem *The Black Hen*, Ramanujan deals with the art of writing poetry. The very first word "it" metaphorically refers to the writing skill of poetry.

He metaphorically compares the art of writing poetry to a growth of leaves to a tree. In the first point of comparison he welcomes the art of poetry writing when it comes as leaves to a tree otherwise it should not come at all so he dismissed the artificial art of poetry writing.

It must come as leaves  
to a tree  
or not at all

If it comes (the art of poetry writing) artificially it will look like a black hen with red round eye stitched on the embroidery. Though the poetry writing and embroidery is done in a very laborious way it stares at us when it is done in an artificial way. The poet refers this as "round red eye" but in the first comparison as *red round eye* because if it is a living *black hen*, colour is more glaring than the shape but in embroidery the black hen's shape is glaring than the colour. Through this the poet opines that artificial poetry writing skill will make us afraid like *the black hen* in an embroidery.

and when it's all there  
the black hen stares  
with its round red eye  
and you are afraid.

The whole poem is metaphorically denotes the natural way of creativity. Another interpretation of this poem is, the poet is contrasting between the classical poets and the modern poets.

The second poem in this collection is *Foundlings in the Yukon*, Miners, while searching for the so-called gold in the Yukon valley, Northern part of North America,

found a “skeleton of a lemming curled around some seeds in a borrow” sealed off by a landslide in Pleistocene times, before stone age, This is a proof of human existence and also the cultivation. Here the seed is a symbolic representation of human civilization.

On the whole, six unbroken grains are “picked and planted after ten thousand years of time”, but luckily they took root within forty eight hours. The germination of eight leaves of the grains symbolizes “a candelabra”.

A normal plant like “Alaskan lupine” takes three years to come to flower but these “upstarts” sprouted quickly as if drinking up the sun. This is metaphorically related with its ‘long deep burial had made them hasty”.

The sudden burst of a seed into a small plant of eight leaves is metaphorically compared to the kick and shift of an “intra-uterine memory’ that is the movement of the child, eagle’s hatching of eggs in the nest. Then the comparison open to “centenarian’s sudden burst of lust” and the Duino elegies” which paved the way for modernism. Duino was a German poet, he wrote elegies which later become the root cause of modernism.

The seed which was found by the miner’s light is older than the oldest but it is only the “infants compact with age”. Generally the age of trees can be determined by its rings but the seed happened to be younger, through the accidental flowering.

Ramanujan was also known for his paradoxical statements in this poem, like “*the miner’s night-light*”, “*infants compact with age*”.

In the poem *At Zero*, the time in the clocks appears to be zero when it lost their tongues and also if the hands fall off. The tongues refer to the sound of the clock (tik-tik sound) the hands of the clock symbolizes spider legs that is very thin. When the pendulums of the clock is also stopped, it is compared to the organ of the dead bulls.

Clock lose their tongues,  
the hands fall off,  
spider legs; pendulums away  
no more, scrotums  
of dead bulls:

The clock seems to be stopped but it moves, likewise “blank brahmin-widow faces”, they cannot express their happiness outside but they have their own emotional feelings inside. The colour of the clock may vary black, grey but the centre is same rounding in twelve numbers whether it may be of metal coated or not, but the rounding of the hands continually at the centre of the clock. To quote, “the axle, dot of metal, turns/continually : the twelve numbers”

The time always moves as circles, the universal time is in circular movement 360° implies 60 minutes x 60 seconds, morning to evening. The rotation of the earth is also implied by mentioning “time circles”. Again “red bricks on the mauve distance” refers to the quick passage of time in a crowded place, there the time cannot stops.

In a crowded place like Airport the time cannot stops, it moves arbitrary for the plane to take-off and also when we are waiting for a plane. Through our eyes we can see only the ‘vapor curling’, the ear is also listening for the time but we cannot hear; only our finger-tip feels the movement of time like a blind man touching the heart beat of a dove. It is metaphorically illustrated as,

in there like a dove  
pulsing:

now faint, now clear,  
in a blind man's hand:

Again the time appears to be zero when a potter-saint, Indian devotee, is making a pot with much concentration and dedication for his job by singing hymns, 'dancing his god' and without knowledge he is kneading the soft red clay by burying his youngest child alive. There time (seems) may be assumed to be zero; when he is worshipping his job there time may be "At Zero".

*Salamanders* is a mythical figure which eats fire. It is shining beautifully like a velvet and appears like a lizard.

The number zero has no value, the number may die or begin like the sunless day, moonless month it also has no value and meaning like the number zero again when "sounds do not become words nor words the rivals of silence" this paradoxical statement is a reference to the immigrants.

"How describe this nothing" – the poet again asking a rhetorical question to the immigrants, because they are running away, he is also afraid of the immigrants, because they are running away, he is also afraid of the immigrants running to other countries for their work where ships are in large number.

In mythology *Salamanders* is a fire eating creature and drinks the flame as we are breathing air, it breathes the flame. But in the month of September (the rainy season) it lived in a marshy place. The flame here symbolizes the tension mood of the immigrants.

In the poem *Fire*, the first point of view with reference to the poet; the brown eyes, giraffes, blue streaks of flash, floating smoke, indigo nudes, sea coast all these coming and disappear in his television in the living room. By watching television the poet is remembering his sweet olden days.

By seeing the fire in his television, he is thinking of his home town where the fire provides life there like Yagna and homum, which are very common, a Hindu ritual to start any work, the real life of his hometown is implied here. The culture of his home land is also revealed. Through his lines,

"Simla and California, the hill a long horse  
with orange hair".

By comparing Simla and California we come to know that he is quiet comfortable in Chicago, where he is working, but through the "supernatural fire" in his living room, he is remembering the good olden days. Simla is in eastern peninsula and the California is in the western side. These connections of the two mountains indicate the poet's relationship between India and America.

Conclusion:

By analyzing all these factors I conclude that A.K.Ramanujan as a poet of treating ambivalence (i.e.) poetic self exile in his writings.

#### **Works Cited**

Dharwadkar, Vinay. *Critical Insights of A.K.R.* CUP: U.K. 2002.

Ramanujan. A. K. *The Black Hen Collections*, Oxford: U.K. 1995.