

RAMANUJAN'S POETRY: A REALISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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“True realism consists in revealing the surprising things which habit keeps covered and prevents us from seeing.” - Jean Cocteau

Abstract:

*Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929-1993) is one of the greatest modern poets of his generation. Startling originality and moving artistry are the key features of his poetry. His Indian experience is at the heart of his poetry. However, interestingly, none of the poems are vogue generalizations about India. On the other hand, they are rooted in peculiar experiences. His attitude towards India is more realistic than his contemporaries who portray India as a metaphysical rather than as a concrete, pragmatic space. His Indianness is, therefore, tempered by the right dose of irony and cosmopolitanism. Ramanujan is, therefore, a poet whose description of the Indian landscape is artistically realistic and in portraying his motherland realistically he has no parallel. The paper aims at studying Ramanujan's verse from the realistic perspective with special reference to his poem *A River*.*

Keywords: *Indianness, realistic, concrete, irony.*

Realism is a literary movement which attempts to give a truthful description of the subject matter. Since it, in a way, is a revolt against Romanticism, therefore, it presents the subject matter without artificiality and embellishment. The poem *A River* is representative poem composed by Ramanujan. The poem is a realistic description of the river (Vaikai) in the city Madura- the seat of Tamil culture and the center of great learning. Instead of handling his theme in romantic cliché Ramanujan presents a realistic view of the river. Ramanujan presents a critique of Tamil culture and Tamil poetic tradition: “The poets only sang of the floods.” The river has been a favorite subject for Tamil poets through ages. These poets have, in a way, overlooked the realistic aspect of the subject. “These poets,” Ramanujan says “depended on stock cliché, stereotypical description of the river and it was usually the beauty of the river that was praised.”

“He said:
The river has water enough
To be poetic
About only once a year.”

These poets fell into the tendency of idolizing the river and in the process ignoring the grim realistic side of the river:

“And then
It carries away
In the first half-hour
Three village houses,
A couple of cows
Named Gopi and Brinda

And one pregnant woman
 Expecting identical twins
 With no moles on their bodies
 To tell them apart.”

The greatness of the above lines lies in the fact that the traditional praise for the river has been contrasted with what is actually experienced by the people during floods. To other poets the flood is a source of inspiration. They highlight the aesthetic aspect of the river. But Ramanujan revolting against this traditional description of the river presents it more realistically. Apart from presenting the grim realities of the river, Ramanujan hints at the sterility of new Tamil poets who still quote the old poets:

“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.”

In the above lines Ramanujan's treatment of the subject matter presents a sharp contrast with other poets who almost always celebrate the beauty and mystical aspects of the river. Ramanujan here highlights the darker side of the picture by giving details of its unappealing aspects and the destruction that it causes during floods. The poem is a beautiful piece of cynical criticism aimed at the poets who ignore the realistic approach of the subject matter and mindlessly ape the same lines quoted by poets for aeon. The poem, therefore, is a representative Ramanujan poem containing his quintessential ironic treatment of his Indian subject matter. The river idolized by other poets here “dries to a tickle”. Which, in turn, makes many of its hidden imperfections and unappealing aspects visible:

“Straw and women's hair
 Clogging the Watergates
 At the rusty bars
 Under the bridges with patches
 Of repair all over them. ”

Ramanujan's portrayal of “women's hair clogging the Watergates,” “bridges with patches” presents a typical depiction of rural India. He portrays it so artistically and realistically that even a lay man can comprehend it.

Ramanujan's short poem Lies is another poem based on his realistic observation wherein the poet deals succinctly with hypocrisy or pretention. Despite feeling a deep repugnance for a tender baby the visitor describes him as beautiful. In fact, a baby just born, before being washed, presents a repulsive sight. But people praise it as a picture of loveliness:

“The new born baby was ugly, moist
 Hairy all over like a wet rat:
 Every visitor said
 She was a beauty,
 Had her mother's eyes.”

The artistic depiction of the subject matter, here the new born baby, coupled with a satiric vein is Ramanujan's forte. The new born baby is not embellished but presented as he is. This feature is what makes

Ramanujan a different and an outstanding poet.

Indian sensibility colors all of the poetry of Ramanujan. The typical Indian poetry of Ramanujan is located in a peculiar Indian landscape where the family is, for example, viewed not only in terms of the warmth and affection that it gives but it is portrayed more realistically whereby Ramanujan often illustrates it as a means of conflict and argument:

“After a night of rage that lasted days
Quarrels in a forest, waterfalls ...”

Relations, the title poem in Ramanujan's second volume of poems is replete with realistic imagery. The turtles, the kitten and the scorpions have all been made to live before our eyes in this poem:

“Someone's cleaning out scorpions
From the many armpits of Shiva
One leg in the air
Broken by time
Or a passing Muslim
From Ghazni.”

His portrayal of mother giving farewell and advice to the grown up son departing for America in the poem “Images” evokes a realistic Indian picture in the mind of the reader:

“Mother's farewell had no words,
No tears, only a long look
That moved on your body
From top to toe
With the advice that you should
Not forget your oil bath
Every Tuesday
When you go to America”

“Satire is people as they are; romanticism, people as they would like to be; realism, people as they seem with their insides out.” (Dawn Powell)

Gustave Courbet's (a French painter) quote aptly sums up Ramanujan's realistic and concrete depiction of the subject matter in his poems: “The essence of realism is its negation of the ideal. Jarring realism is the hallmark of Ramanujan's poetry. Ramanujan, as a mature artist, depicts things as they are with a tinge of bitterness. He presents a truthful picture of the subject matter. With his intellectual credentials and stylistic devices coupled with his objective expression, he is a class by himself.

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