

The Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan: In Search of Self**Anamika Kumari**

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.4.6.12**Abstract**

Self at the centre of all kinds of search manifests itself in Ramanujan's art from the very beginning of his creative life and the artist has all through assumed an elusive character till his vision clears; well, but his vision is gained through experience. His vision of the self permeates most of his elusive poems, the poems which have so far been faulted on one count or another. First, perhaps is "The Stridess" which is not by chance, the first poem of Ramanujan's first volume of poems, and this volume The Striders is also entitled after this poem. Ramanujan concern with the self and hence his idea of the individuality of beings is very much there but misted with an uncanny subject like waterbug and mare, gone veiled under an objectivist style of the moderns.

Keywords- Self, Manifest, Vision, Experience, Individuality.

"The Striders" to Ramanujan is a uniquely personal experience such an experience as characteristic "KmnO₄ is Grandfather's shaving Glass." These two poems, among many others, are not as banal as they are made out to be. The style adopted in the poems is peculiarly a Ramanujan device to serve best his slowly evolving vision of the self, In the first poem, the poet emphatically focuses on the miracle performed by the strider, a tiny creature, which always escape our grand-seeing eyes. It is said that John Keat could smell the beauty even in the garbage. But it is Ramanujan who senses merit in the smallest. Well, with Ramanujan, it is not so much the case of appreciating the observed, the outward as an act of inward sing what is seen, what is encountered; there is always some symbiosis between outward observation and self-exploration. Such symbiotic relation is natural to the poet, to the artist, the sensitive soul: but to us, normal us, it only sounds absurd.

A strider is a symbol of an individual self, while the ripple skin of a stream is a metaphor of the flux of being. "Towards Simplicity" is also another poem of Ramanujan in his search for the self and to understand its physical nature, in particular. It is roughly designed in a 'Sonnet' form.

Corpuscle, skin

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cell, and membrane,
each its minute seasons
clocked within the bones.

Millions grow lean and fall away
in the hourly autumn of the body.
But fertile in fall, ending as others begin,
to the naivete of death they run.

From the complexity
of reasons gyring within reasons,
of co-extensive spring and autumn,

into the soil as soil we come,
to find for a while a simplicity
in larger, external seasons. (Ramanujan)

The image of gyre here reminds us of W. B. Yeats and his idea of human history changing and resulting in all sorts of changes. Qualitative as well as quantitative Ramanujan's quest here is limited in scope, limited to the level of body which is such a mysterious house as embodying "co-extensive spring and autumn" and inside which millions of cells times and carpuscles die their "hourly" death: they are "fertile in fall, ending as others begin." This poem is an attempt on the part of the poet to understand the "co-extensive" changes, the continuously changing phenomena within this human body, within the self on its physical level. Birth, growth and death characterize the nature of our physical existence. But this is too simplistic to understand the "hourly" deaths and births that go ceaselessly within us; too deductive to comprehend "the complexity of reason gyring within reasons." We can also notice and feel how sensitively the poet describes the unraveling of $KMNO_4$ in living terms of human and plant proximity: vein, trees and filament: part sensation, capillary roots: loosening skein and wine-dark. Thus, Ramanujan's interest is evidently not of a chemist's in this poem as his interest is not of a biologist's in "Towards Simplicity".

"Element of composition", the opening poems of "second sight" introduces the readers to Ramanujan's idea of the self, its composition out of many elements, its process of change through a reciprocal giving and talking, and its sudden transformation to a completely new, unforeseen life-form, "caterpillar". This poem is a culmination of Ramanujan's long search for identity of the self, its nature and its reality.

Composed as I am, like others, of elements....
Father's seed and Mother's egg
gathering earth, air, fire mostly water....

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into a chattering self tangled in love and work,
scary dreams.... (Ramanujan)

But into the making of one's personality, many incidents, many experiences go like scary dreams. Uncle's eleven fingers playing childhood games. The riots of Nairobi: the lepers as well as the goddess of Madurai: the Muharram tigers and the epileptic saints and all. The self is affected by them, as they are affected by the self. This self evolves, develops and grows through many divisions, decompositions ("Towards simplicity") and not only through additions of experiences or elements.

Ramanujan explain the phenomenon of mutual exchanges between the self and other forces –

I pass through them
as they pass through me talking and learning
affections, seeds, skeletons... (Ramanujan)

Memory occupies a seminal place in the art of Ramanujan. The family poems almost invariably give the impression that memory is their indispensable part, which makes them livelier or more disturbing. That apart, it is also classily associated with Ramanujan's vision of the self. Here, many questions raise. Is memory in Ramanujan or dead deposit, wherein all the present like the past would rush and get dumped? Is it like a memory bank in a computer? or, is it a graveyard from which time's ghosts are conjured up to be exorcised by the psychoanalysts? In order to answer these questions, one needs to consider Ramanujan's concept of Time which again is intimately, linked with memory. "On a Delhi Sundial helps us understand that Ramanujan grieves for a "Sundial time" as opposed to the modern idea of it: four and twenty ghostly circles." The poet says:

But who, among tourists
on a five-day tour,
can put the clock back
and run into sundial time? (Ramanujan)

Sundial time is for the poet, a real and living concept or as in "Loving for the centre". This real time is realized "Suddenly", on a point of time, when all the "connections" are "several" from "history" to bring about a completely new and strange beginning.

The concept of real memory and the vision of the self informing it are also embodied in "Carpe Diem", another poem of Ramanujan which features in P. Lal's anthology. In the poem, the poet by means of the metaphors like "tree" and "fruit" explores the living continuity of real memory as well as of the self, he says that a fruit when plucked does not forget the tree's inverted image. This also affirms the fact that no single moment can be separable from real time, the flux. Memory is all the time alive there as the time part is always present, if not in our consciousness, but in our subconscious psyche. Many of the myths and legends, that some of Ramanujan's poems enshrine, unravel another significant

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facet of living memory, which pertains to the “collective unconscious” in Jung’s phrase. For, the memory of the family relations is not the only type, individually lived or consciously presented in Ramanujan. No less important is the memory which comes from a distant past, perhaps even from time immemorial. “Prayers to Lord Murugan-R” and “The Difference-SS” among others disclose such & memory. In “The Difference” the poet says:

But today, out of
the blue when Vishnu
came to mind,
the dark one you know
who began as a dwarf.... (Ramanujan)

Therefore, real memory can also synchronise the time span of a thousand ages Dwarf: the Vaman avatar of Vishnu may be traced (back to a pre-Ramayan era) to a point of the present. Thereby, memory is a way to realize how the past persists in life, in the present. Ramanujan comes near Bergson again in his concept of memory. Bergson says, “Memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present.”

With a Hindu background it is not easy for the self to find peace with an alien culture of America. The physical alienation creates moments of dilemma and the poet falls back on his Hindu beliefs to resolve them. Resisting the temptations of the American culture, he chooses:

Conventions of despair.
They have their pride.
I must seek and will find.
My particular hell only in Hindu mind.

But in the poem, “Another view of Grace”, at least on mental plane the bred-brahmin samskaras crumble after a great resistance, to seek physical pleasure. G. N. Devy also has found fault with the Hindu content in some poems, commenting on “The Hindoo”, he doesn’t hurt a fly or a spider withers. R. Devy says: “The irony is that he does not hurt a spider or a fly not because he is a Hindu, but because he is an outsider, an alienated being. He has no sufficient involvement in life to feel disturbed by the insects, or by the insect he suspects them to have had in their past lives. Ramanujan merely “uses” Hindu metaphysics, as he “uses” history elsewhere to guard his alienation.” In another poem, “The Hindu he reads his Gita and is calm at all events” (R), the studied and carefully practiced stoicism gives way when he is stuck by some unknown prehistoric fear:

Yet when I meet on a little boy’s face
The prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat
I choke, for ancient hands are at
My throat. (Ramanujan)

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Being passive by nature, the poet's self is in constant interaction with the persons it intimately comes in contact with. In the days of childhood the father's influence is natural and undeniable:

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. ("Self-Portrait's")

"The Poem", observes Chirantan Kulshrestha, "dramatizes" a self whose essential passivity allows it to resemble others over an indeterminate stretch of time. This identification is important because it lends the self the freedom to share different identities and attitudes, each of them real in feeling and "mysterious" in apprehension. The poet is not talking about the inadequate self, but about a common feature in Indian families.

A study of the self in the poetry of Walt Whitman provides an interesting foil to himself in Ramanujan's. At first, Whitman's self in the "Song of Myself" is not like a character in a novel which passes through chain of situations, is acted upon by a variety of forces, personal and impersonal and becomes in the process a complex figure. Rather, it springs as "developed" right from the beginning so that its growth and progression is organic. It's becoming is but an expansion of its being. But Ramanujan's self, as already discussed, is passive and therefore it undergoes varied experiences, assuming different roles it does resemble a character in a novel seeing himself from different points of view. Secondly, Whitman's self "Refuses to be shackled by hereditary and environmental influences." But for Ramanujan family is the life of his life. He is deeply indebted to his parents and is molded by outer influences.

To sum up, to read Ramanujan's poetry is to be aware of a highly sensitive person's pleasant but, at times, agonizing experience towards realizing the self. If a part of his self is written down and inserted by his parents, the other is always in the process of change, from doubts and tensions towards serenity and wisdom. In this process he experiences himself as a subject and at the same time succeeds in objectifying his inwardness both imaginatively and conceptually.

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