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Diasporic Sensibility of A.K. Ramanujan

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Despite A.K. Ramanujan stayed in America, he never forgot his mother and motherland and always lived in the reminiscences of Indian culture. His poems prove that he was pulled by his mother and motherland again and again. His poems prove that he was not only mentally but also physically alienated from his birth place, India. His poetry proves that his heart was deeply rooted in Indian culture and society. It also proves that he faced a lot of identical problems in America and that's why he felt alienated.

Keeping all these things in view, it is very essential to see how Ramanujan was alienated from great Indian culture, how he felt rootlessness in a foreign country and how he proved himself as a true son of Mother India. His consciousness about Indian society and culture brought him recognition all over the world. Therefore, it seems necessary to evaluate his personality based on his poetry in this context at this moment.

Ramanujan was an Indian English poet of diaspora tradition and that's why Prithvi Nandi says in *Indian Poetry in English Today* that "the Indian Poet in English represents his generation and speaks for it. Yet he knows his own generation is freak, part of an affluent subculture, rootless, often alienated from the mainstream of the Indian experience" (6). Not only he stayed in a foreign country but Sharat Chandra, Ezekiel, Moraes, Adil Jusawalla, R. Parthasarathy and Vikram Seth also stayed a few years in foreign nations. All of them regarded their own country, India as their natural home.

At this moment it can be noted that Ramanujan's alienation from inherent religious ethos finds expression in several ways. Whereas alienation is the dubious birth right of the modern artist in any society, the situation of Ramanujan reveals several forces at work which appear to generate a specially strong sense of alienation in him.

As it is well known to all that poetry reflects the poet's confrontation with life and cultural values. Most of the existential problems of life are taken up by the poets. Whether a person is shifted to an alien soil for an intellectual or economic reason or else the country in which he is born and lives may be under the power of imperialism, his life gets affected by the cross cultural and religious encounters. Thus the work of A.K. Ramanujan is outstanding by any standard because of his first hand experience of a life of alienation in a foreign country like America.

It is also significant that the modern life has had a remarkable impact on literature. The problems of the literature are related to the socio-politico- religious factors but the problem of literature at present time is its close relation to the human mind.

It is also to be noted that the group or society consciousness has been turned into individual consciousness as felt by the poets like Ramanujan. It is a fact that alienation is a state of living in which a man's soul has departed from his own self, his nature, his companions in which his mother, father, wife and children are included. A man's acute sense of isolation, rootlessness and suffering are rightly depicted by Erich Fromm in *The Sane Society* in this way: "... alienation is ... a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the centre of his world as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person" (120).

It is true that the motif, alienation has an important place both in modern life and in literature especially in the poetry because it is a powerful mode of expression of deepest feelings. The physical, psychological, spiritual and mental alienations have been the powerful themes in many modern poets like A.K. Ramanujan. The image of an alienated and isolated self has been used by the poets like Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, Sharat Chandra, Kamala Das, Keki N. Daruwalla, R. Parthasarathy and Jayant Mahapatra.

As far as alienation in Indian English poetry is concerned, it can be interpreted in many ways according to its various layers of meaning. Different kinds of alienation can be seen in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. It is true that Ramanujan was physically and mentally alienated from Indian society and culture as well as from his family members. Ramanujan was alienated from his religion and that is why he has written a poem like "Prayer to Lord Murugan" which proves that he was really alienated from some important values and Sanskrit which is an ancient language of India.

For Ramanujan, if the traditional, religion is a lost world, he finds little to enthuse himself in present day socio-political set-up of which he is an unsparing critic, while he is at the same time aware of his own cultural rootlessness. Not only is this, but discovery of cultural alienation is even more disturbing for Ramanujan. It can be noted that the impact of westernization has estranged the poet from his own ancient culture and heritage; nevertheless, he realizes that his roots cannot lie elsewhere.

In his poem "Self Portrait" A.K. Ramanujan talks about an uncertain self alien to its own viewer.

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometime 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

(Collected Poems, 23)

Diverse modes of alienation have thus been a strong impulse behind the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. A very vital question which may now be posed is: to what extent alienation proved to be a fully creative force, and if it has not, what are the reasons for this. The

alienation of A.K. Ramanujan is further accentuated by the fact that he belongs to the advanced urban society of America which has now lost touch not only with the vast rural masses but also with traditional religious and cultural beliefs and values of great Indian culture. In this situation, the theory and practice of western modernism naturally has a great attraction for Ramanujan and the resulting spirit of emulation may be intensified his alienation further. This proves alienation occurs in a state of cultural displacement, dismemberment and disorder.

The story of Indian poets' search for an identity is in harmony with modern culture and demands of modern life. It can be noted that the development of such an identity is a continuing process and in the course of this process the core of Indian poets' has shifted and changed over time and that's why they were pulled and pressurized by tradition and modern life.

Next in the process of social and cultural transformation, there has been no flight from the traditional culture and the identity or identities it confers on Indians. It can be noted that there has been no rejection of tradition. It is remarkable that the great ancient cultural tradition still holds its sway on the minds of Indian English poets like A.K. Ramanujan. It is not an unmixed blessing for him. One can easily find that in Indian culture a fascinating and extremely varied blend of unity and diversity. It is as much a fact of Indian English poetry scene as of other areas of cultural life.

It is true that Ramanujan's poetry incorporates a sustained quest – the quest for roots in the tradition and the quest for a higher self. Ramanujan was deeply involved with the problem of self definition, the web of memories help him to develop a framework within which the identities of the self could be presented in their complexity. Not only this, one can discern in the poet's preoccupation with his personal and racial past the modernist exploration of the existential problems of time and what it does to life. The image of home was very significant for Ramanujan. He used this image again and again in his poetry. He was emotionally attached with the home. The home reminds him his past and present.

It can be seen easily by any reader that Ramanujan was alienated from his great Indian culture as well as from his family. He was not only alienated from a Brahmin society but he was also alienated from his Tamil and Kannada societies. Hence, one can see that he was in search of his roots.

It is quite significant that Ramanujan's temperaments and tones fascinate the critical privilege of the people because of his poetic height and perception. In his book *Modern Indian Poetry in English* Bruce King betrays this idea: "Ramanujan is widely read in India, along with Western and Western influenced modern Indian poetry in Indian languages. This unpredictable fusion of varied roots in Ramanujan's poetry is true of the attitudes it expresses" (211).

His poems "One More After Reading Homer" and "Take Care" illustrate the turmoil of the modern society through the city of Chicago. Ramanujan is struck with wonder seeing the Cassandra-like adversity in the deaths by fire owing to love, indifference and hatred of humanity. It can be noted that in the poem "Take Care" Ramanujan describes the tribal distinctions in Chicago with the help of images like black houses against white snow, black and white squires on kitchen cloth and pepper and salt. Ramanujan blames the Whites who hate blacks with their racial feelings.

In Chicago

do not walk slow.
Find no time
to stand and stare.
Down there, blacks look black.
And whites, they look blacker.

(Collected Poems, 104)

There is no doubt that a diaspora poet like Ramanujan enjoys two different lives – the one within, the one without. It is true that because of the present mobility conventional notions of exile have taken a new shape. There is no difference between Ramanujan and other Indians who were staying abroad. In *Modern Indian Poetry in English* Bruce King says that “I did not mean by regionalism, provincialism, nor did I mean by it just the devotion to a particular region. What I was saying was the particularity of the experience. Even when you are cosmopolitan, you ultimately have to know something quite deeply” (214). It is true that Ramanujan was deeply attached to India. It’s visible that disturbed by the deep sense of alienation in the modern world, the poet makes an intense search for relationships through his poems.

It is quite clear that Ramanujan was staying in two cultures – one Eastern and the other Western. The Eastern is related to India and Western is related to America for him. This results in the formation of a self of Ramanujan which acquires a distinctive identity. His poetry is inevitably the product of this distinctive identity so that Ramanujan convincingly declares the following things in his poem “Elements of composition”.

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving
affections, seeds, skeletons.

(Collected Poems, 122)

It is obvious that “Elements of Composition” sums up the essence of the poetic self, and resolves the problems of a dichotomous identity which apparently traverses through the woods of his poems. It is very significant that in his another poem “Death and the Good Citizen” the poet cherishes a hope to die in his own native land. Ramanujan prefers to be cremated in Sanskrit and sandalwood in his poem “Death and the Good Citizen”.

Hidebound, even worms cannot
have me: they’ll cremate
me in Sanskrit and sandalwood,
have me sterilized
to a scatter of ash.

(Collected Poems, 136)

Ramanujan’s inner forms never intend to dispossess their ties with the native land, India. It’s true that affirmation of such an attitude, in terms of his explicit preference, makes him an instinctive insider, a settler in the blood.

It is a well-known fact to all that a man’s identity is unique and very much a private thing. But at the same time this identity takes a complete shape because it develops from and within a specific culture. Therefore, it is necessarily determined by and related to historical and social factors. This type of specificity of a cultural identity often urges on to the development of a recalcitrant personality which consciously or unconsciously tries to retain

its essential self, in spite of physical displacement or what in the diasporic discourse is known to all as migration from one culture to another.

It's very important to note here that expatriation is often thought of as a breach or a rift: as a break between the self and its home that is beyond repair. A man knows that expatriation can also become a dynamic enriching force in a person. The present poet, A.K. Ramanujan also feels this unhealable breach within him. A good and conducive work atmosphere and the sense of achievement at being a phenomenal success in an alien soil cannot transform America into a home, India. It is also significant that the constant awareness of this rift has given the poet A.K. Ramanujan the positive urges to create very remarkable poems. Staying between two cultures – America and India, poetry helps him make sense of this predicament and the conscious decision to live in it.

It is also to be noted that the more he lives and writes abroad, the more he becomes aware of his Indian culture and heritage. It is true that Indianness is not merely a part of Ramanujan's past but work continuous to live in him, condition and regulate his attitude, behaviour and values. Ramanujan proudly acknowledges the continued influence of the inherited value system and there by affirms his deep and live relationship with people and places of past. At this moment, it is also to be noted that Ramanujan stayed in India since his early childhood upto the age of thirty. His Indianness can be seen in his "Still Another View of Grace".

Bred Brahmin among singers of shivering hymns
I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the street
Beyond the constable's beat.

(Collected Poems, 45)

At this moment it can be said that it is the rootedness in one's own culture and the relatedness to one's people and family that offer emotional stability to A.K. Ramanujan. It is also to be noted that the assurance of this basic relationship with his family members and Indian culture has enabled him to successfully connect himself to the outside world. He inherited the values of acceptance and accommodation from the culture of a joint Indian Hindu family. This quality has helped him to open his doors and himself to others and other cultures.

One can also find that the expatriate in Ramanujan would never let Western work-orientedness subordinate the importance of relationships. This is the secret of Ramanujan's remarkable success in his work in America where he lived until his death.

It can be observed that Ramanujan has assimilated the cultures of his native land and that of land of his migration i.e., Indian culture and American culture and successfully brought alive the indigenous transition and culture in his poetry. It is also true that Ramanujan has made a multi-cultural commitment and transcended the limitations of an expatriate poet. In *Journal of South Asian Literature* Surjit S. Dulai stated the following things about Ramanujan:

"His poetry is born out of the dialectical inter play between his Indian and American experience on the one hand, and that between his sense of his own self and all experience on the other. Its substance is both Indian and Western. Starting from the centre of his sense of self and his Indian experience, his poetry executes circles comprehending ever-wider

realities, at maintaining a perfectly taut evolving central vision and the expanding scene before it..."(151).

One more important fact to be noted here is that Ramanujan is pulled by his mother and motherland again and again. In his "Looking for the Centre" he tries to discover his roots and finding it not easy, he tries to extricate himself from this bondage and on this moment he says,

Suddenly, connections severed
as in a lobotomy, unburdened
of history, I lose
my bearings, a circus zilla spun
at the end of her rope, dizzy
terrified
and happy. And my watchers
watch, cool as fires
in a mirror.

(Collected Poems, 185)

This poem proves that his family connections helped him to discover his roots. He remembers his family members one by one while settled in America. He also remembered his birth place, India. One can note that the country of his birth haunts his mind endlessly. His poem "Waterfalls in a Bank" depicts his past.

As I transact with the past as with another
country with its own customs, currency,
stock exchange, always
at a loss when I count my change: water –
falls of dying children...

(Collected Poems, 189)

One more vital point to be noted is that in dealing with emotional, psychological or alienation in action, the events are the basic elements. The events may have occurred in the poet's life or his relative or else they might have been superimposed on the environment indirectly or in a symbolic way. Thus the events bring with them into focus the emotion of the doer of the action which gave meaning to the action.

It can be said that the theme of alienation gets its significance because of its opposite, essence of belonging. It is also to be noted that a alienated poet like Ramanujan cannot escape from the values by which he is alienated or the person by whom he is alienated or the environment by which he is alienated. His alienation may be classified into different categories such as religious alienation, cultural alienation, self alienation, social alienation and economic alienation, but he in general suffers in isolation.

According to all these things, the very meaning of life is constantly to proceed forward in all situations boldly. Despite Ramanujan was staying in America, he maintained the status of equilibrium by not forgetting his own Indian culture. This proves that he successfully managed himself to live in two cultures simultaneously. It means the truth of life lies neither in alienation nor in essence of belonging, but in the balancing of these two experiences of life. It is a universal fact that life is not a process of passing from one end to another, but is a cyclical process of day and night, joys and sorrows and alienation and a sense of belonging which is wonderfully described by A.K. Ramanujan in his poetry.

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