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Memory as the Axis of Poetry: A Study of A.K. Ramanujan's *Obituary*

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A society is created by the blocks of family units. Stronger the blocks, stronger the building of the society. Families are the strongest blocks on which the society rests. Without family there would be no society and to maintain a good society, a woman plays a pivotal role, whether she is a sister, wife or mother. The family is the most important unit of social organization. The family unit – primarily a man and a woman living together in harmony and peace – is and always will be an essential social organization or unit of any society. This relationship alone provides equilibrium in a sexual, emotional, intellectual and social way as no other can. The role of the family is to give a praiseworthy example, so that others within the society can follow as a model, resulting in the building of the society. The most respected and commendable member of the family is the Father. Fatherhood is truly a vocation that builds the foundation on which families and society rests. A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is mainly based on the familial relationships. He recalls his past memories through the medium of poetry. His poetry is exceptional, realistic and sociably applicable. He has a style of lyrical sensitivity that embraces extraordinary distinctive poetry, infancy recalls, ideology, pastenents, reverent proficiency and a broad kind of human conditions. In the poem "Obituary" Ramanujan has ironically presented the image of his father.

Bruce King correctly introduces Ramanujan as deeply rooted in Indian culture and yet fully cosmopolitan. He notes, "And then there is Ramanujan, a Brahmin, yes, and perhaps the world's greatest scholar of the languages and literatures of southern India, but married to a Syrian Christian and for most of his life a professor in an American university. When he cooked for himself he was a vegetarian; when invited to a conference in Paris he ate all kinds of gourmet food as he felt he should experience the world." (1). But even, as Ramanujan once said, "When you are cosmopolitan, you ultimately have to know something quite deeply." (2) Above all Ramanujan is an original Indian say-so, inspite of the fact that he consumed decades in the west. Ramanujan pen down the disparagement of virtuous values among poets, politician and ordinary people. His poetry investigate unyielding memories of childhood. Ramanujan's poetry is "rooted in and stems from the Indian environment and reflects its mores, often ironically." (3). He has cut himself from off from his immediate native environment, but this has been a gain and not a loss. His essentially Indian sensibility has enabled him to go to India's past and his sense of Indian history and tradition is unique. The past comes to life in his poetry, and this 'presence of past' might not have been possible had he continued to live in India.

Ostensibly, there is a repetitive quest for roots in his poetry that takes the shape of memories of childhood and matureness as they have been spaced by his stay abroad. Ramanujan carefully comprehend the prevalent trends of contemporary verse in his works. Having a thrilling existence, he does not see life through the coloured glass of imagination, apparently he painted a scene portraiture of life as it is, giving due importance on it's infinite varieties, strangeness and ridiculousness. Exactness and detail are the other characteristics of his poetry. Ramanujan signals

the centrality of family in his poetry. He thought that Indian has sensitive sense of familial self: they carry India and it's memories wherever they goes. By reading his poems "one may detect awesterns trained intellect looking at things oriental with a detached interest"(4). The Indian sensibility is to be found in every Indians. The family figures most eminently in Ramanujan's poetry. Actually, the family may be considered as one of the prime motif of his verse. Ramanujan's poetry is primarily based on the memories of his past life, that he can not oblivate even after residing in west. The sense of indianess was always lingering in his mind and by the time he occupied it's place in his heart. His poetry we can say address both individual and racial memory. Memory becomes an important source in vivifying his relationship with India, within and without. It is more than a psychological prop or support for the poet that brings alive all in his past that is usable. It's not an emotional nostalgia that obstruct or hinder progress and throws in a past without looking any good in the here and the now. It is an active lingering to move forward with vigour. And the memory that got its perfect place in Ramanujan's poetry helps him to establish rootedness. As Pramila Paul in her article 'Roots that Roam : Ramanujan's Poetry' says that "The awareness and assurance of rootedness in turn establishes emotional stability and enables him to integrate the past and the present, the immediate and the remote, all that is within and without, the Western work-orientedness and the Indian human-relatedness"(5)

Father is an important figure in the family. Today most families rely upon the income of both mothers and fathers. Father brings the strength to the parenting roles. He plays an important role in a child's development from birth through adulthood. Infact, various studies have reached the same ending : benefits – sociably and economically. Traditionally, father act in a preservative, encouraging, sympathetic way towards their children. Active father figures play a major role in decreasing conduct and mental or emotional problems in young men and women. An increased amount of father – child participation may aid in highten a child's social, firmness, educational accomplishment and their prospects to have a firm marriage as an adult. Their children may also be more eager about the world around them and prosper greater problem solving efficiency. As according to Wikipedia, "Fatherhood as legitimate identity shared by specific men and their children can be dependent on domestic factors and behaviours"(6). Ramanujan's poetry is "rooted in and stems from the Indian environment and reflects its mores, often ironically." (7)

"Obituary is such a relevant poem based on father. It's written in the second volume of Ramanujan's collective poem 'Relations' 1979. The poem is written in a simple diction in eight paragraphs. An obituary is a tribute to a person who has passed away featuring the high point of his life. But such is not the case in this poem, instead the son keeps on ridiculing his father about the things that he left behind as legacy. It's written in the first person, the son is the narrator of the poem. Ramanujan recalls his father's death, the tragical outcome on the family because of the sudden death of his father. 'Obituary' is a poem that delineates a middle class life in a male-dominated Indian society and the advantages and meanings of the poet's life. Father is the major figure in the family that bears the whole responsibilities of the family, who wants nothing but only the exaltation of the family. But after his death an innumerable difficulties seems to haunt the family and in return sorrows and commotions persists. In the poem Ramanujan depicts the image of his father more graphically inspite of the fact that his tone grows ironical at some places. In Obituary he does not remembers or recalls his father in a sobbing way but reside on the pragmatic problems that his family faced after the sudden death of his father due to cardiac arrest. Thus he writes :

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him(CP, 111)

The opening lines suggest the lists of things that the poet left after his death as a legacy. Seeming quite aggrieved with his father, the son points out the number of things that his father left unprepared and disorganized : his table piled with newspaper full of dust, some debts to be paid, the daughters to be married and a bedwetting grandson. He left a changed wife who become a widow and the daughters whose marriages seems to be difficult in his absence. According to Wikipedia “Discrimination against female children has been a topic of debate. It has been a subject of concern and sociological significance. This subject raises the cultural aspects about the role of a female child in society, what her human rights are as a human being and a number of sensitive issues. This issue is important because there is nearly universal consensus on the need for gender equality.”(8). An unmarried daughter is treated as a burden to be omitted by the family which as a result subjects her to differential treatment. Placing emphasis on marriage means raising girls in a manner primarily aimed at moulding them into a societal expectation of what an ideal bride or wife should be like, instead of fostering and encouraging individual characteristics.(9). Parents are endowed with the responsibilities of marrying of their daughters with a good amount of dowry that suits their status. Furthermore, the poet talks about a grandson who has an incorrigible habit of urinating on bed. Thus, it can be marked that through the poem the poet’s father had left nothing only the insipid memories in a form of scrap. The poet is of the view that his father left him with trials and tribulations. M. Rajagopalachary and S.Ravinder in their article ‘Kinship with Nature in Ramanujan’s Poetry’ depicts that “Ramanujan is primarily concerned with human relationships, Nature also plays a major role in defining his mode of poetic experience. He concludes that man and Nature are not separate altogether and there is a mysterious link between them” (10).

a house that leaned
slowly through our growing
years on a bent coconut
tree in the yard.
Being the burning type,
he burned properly
at the cremation

as before, easily
and at both ends,
left his eyes coins
in the ashes that didn't
look one bit different,
several spinal discs, rough,
some burned to coal, for sons(CP :111)

The house in which the poet grew up is leaned 'on a bent coconut'. This can also be treated as a legacy for the poet after his father's death, as the house is not in a very good condition, it's tumbledown and decrepit. The poet mentions that the neglect house leant on the coconut tree through their growing years. The deterioration in their quality of life is apparent, from the metaphor of the house. It may signify that the family had to live a life of scrounger by straying here and there aimlessly due to a dilapidated house that is bent on a coconut tree. Here again we do not perceive any great affection and respect on the part of the poet for his father. Infact he speaks ironically about his father when he says that his father was a 'burning type', (means that his father was of hot tempered)which is the result of his own dejection. These lines also highlights a point that his father may be a chain smoker when the poet says that he burnt properly at the cremation. Rama Nair in a book edited by R.K.Dhawan is of the views that " this poem works on the principle of a paradox. The paradox is that, though the influence of the father is so devastating on the son, it nevertheless becomes the nucleus for the son's creative tension.

When the father was cremated, the coins were placed on his body's eyes or it can also be said through the lines that his eyes looks like a coin while cremating and the eyes did not have any feelings. The poet here wants to tell that his father didn't have feelings even when he was alive. Father's eyes were compared to a metallic coin this indicates that perhaps his eyes were always on money when he was alive. He also left some spinal disc that were half-burnt and the poet advised the children to pick carefully and throw it in Thriveni, the confluence of three holy rivers, where the bones of the dead immersed in the holy water which is treated very sacred as per the hindu rituals and customs. There is also a sense of resentment at the observation of age old rituals and customs. For instance, the poet does not respect or regard the custom of throwing his father's ashes at the three holy rivers after the cremation. He is totally against this and think that it's only a blind faith of the people who are guided by the false priest. Bruce King remarks about this poem that Ramanujan "debunks attempts to give grandeur to rituals, tradition, ceremonies, death, or history. In 'obituary', a father's death and cremation leaves nothing to the family except 'debts and daughters', a changed mother and annual rituals to perform." (11)

He goes on to say that there was no proper epitaph erected near his father's grave, commemorating his birth and death. The poet says that this shows how weak and incapable he was. Even he took birth with less effort through caesarean operation and his death was also quite easy through the cardiac arrest at the fruits market. The poet means to say that he has gained nothing good and proper in his life. He was worthless.

“But someone told me
he got two lines
in an inside column
of a Madras newspaper
sold by the kilo
exactly four weeks later
to streethawkers
who sell it in return
to the small groceries
where I buy salt,
coriander,
and jaggary
in newspaper cones
that I usually read(CP,111)

Furthermore, the narrator says that his father has gained nothing worth in his life. He come to know about the two lines of the obituary of his father in the Madras newspaper. The paper was sold in kilos four weeks later to the street hawkers. This shows the insignificance things that he has achieved in his lifetime. Earlier the poet happily used to read the newspaper wrapped in the groceries like salt, coriander and jaggery for great fun. But now he read that for the hope of finding his father's obituary lines. The poets says that it will be a tribute to his father when he succeeds in fetching those two lines. Thus the poet ventures to discover some meaning of his father's existence as he had left a 'changed mother' and 'one annual ritual' every year. Chittaranjan Misra in his research article 'Image of Family in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan' talks about the fact that, "one does not live in obituaries in print nor the lines on the headstone. While attempts of this kind belong to more or less a western method of documenting and preserving the memory of the dead, the Indian way is more human and warm. Because it involves more than one annual ritual and the renewal is more than mere reminiscence"(12). Ramanujan firmly believes that "all creative art must arise out of a specific soil and flicker with a spirit of a place, as D.H.Lawrence has said is not an unnatural or unreasonable expectation. He is an artist whose own response to, and the understanding of, his native traditions, culture and general ethos lend the note of authenticity to his creation. This note forms the core of the native experience or sensibility." (12)

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