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A. K. Ramanujan's Translational Journey: Quest for Eternity

Dr. Mirza Sibtain Beg

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Shia P. G. College, Lucknow, U. P.

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Abstract:

A. K. Ramanujan (1929-1993) was a distinguished linguist, anthropologist, folklorist, translator and colossal poet writing in English. His extant work is a colorful canvas of embroidery where the threads are inextricably interwoven, and exude multifaceted art and conscientious craft. A. K. Ramanujan was a prolific translator who held a mirror to reflect the beauty of Indian Ancient Literature and to give delight to the western world. His translations present theoretical aspects of translating and the role of a translator, invariably enunciates factors explaining the process and technique involved in translating a particular text. His theory and practice of the translation of a particular text corresponds to the rendering of classical, medieval and contemporary poetry from Dravidian languages Tamil, and Kannada into English. He stuck to translating only Tamil and Kannada -the languages he was well versed in- into English. The spirit that spurred him to become a translator was to serve the country with all his skill, talent and resourcefulness by showcasing its rich and varied literary and cultural heritage to the rest of the world. His translations proved a pivotal tool to serve this purpose. The present paper aims at giving a peep into his translational corpus and to unravel his concern for promoting and promulgating the liveliness and richness of the Dravidian literature in the western countries, and where he succeeded immensely.

A. K. Ramanujan's books of translation includes *Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1965), *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *No Lotus in the Navel* (1969), *Speaking of Siva* (1972), *Samskara* (1976), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), and *Poems of Love and War* (1985).

A. K. Ramanujan was a distinguished Indian English poet, a philologist, a linguist, an anthropologist and a colossal translator. His academic research corpus permeates through five languages: Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Sanskrit and English. He is regarded as one of the doyens of Indian English literary modernism. A. K. Ramanujan's translations are limpid pool of his erudition, highly reflective of his virtuosity to exploit all resources unabashedly, be it literary, linguistic, cultural, or technical. His aim at translating the Dravidian literature into English exemplifies his undying spirit to serve his motherland with all his skill and adroitness to reflect the rich and varied literary and cultural heritage to the western world. His translations proved an expressway between the two shores of the literary world. K. R. S. Iyenger is highly appreciative of the poet-translator in the following words:

He stabilized his position as one of the most talented of the 'new' poets. He has englished with great simplicity and force some of the vachanas from Kannada and

some of the love lyrics from *Kurunthokai*. These latter have won praise from Tamil and English scholars alike. (K. R. S. Iyenger, 2002)

A. K. Ramanujan's translational voyage is extremely esoteric and delightful at the same time, it joyously takes us into the enchanting and fascinating tapestry of Dravidian literature. His translational oeuvre consists of: *Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1965), *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *No Lotus in the Navel* (1969), *Speaking of Siva* (1972), *Samskara* (1976), *Hymns of the Drowning* (1981), and *Poems of Love and war* (1985). The aforementioned books unravel his unhindered desire for promoting the richness, fullness, liveliness, and exquisite variety of Dravidian literature to rest of the world, and immensely got success in this pursuit considerably. He accomplished this task out of his love, reverence and penchant for his native literature regardless of any monetary and worldly gains.

To translate a poem of different time, culture and language is a tall letter- a very complex and cumbersome phenomenon. The primal problem involved in the translation lies in its improbability. Robert Frost was also of the view that the beauty of poetry is lost in its translation. Considering translation as an art, one may strive to evolve precision or to accomplish it. Ramanujan too was of the similar view: "Items are more difficult to translate than relations, textures more difficult than phrasing, linear order more difficult than syntax, lines more difficult than pattern." (Ramanujan, 1981)

Despite of many difficulties associated in this task, Ramanujan came with flying colors by virtue of his extreme enthusiasm and artistic virtuosity. He is a versatile creative writer who can transfuse indomitably Tamil poetry into English. He is a creative writer in two and translator of three languages:

As we grew up Sanskrit and English were our father-tongues and Tamil and Kannada our mother-tongues. The father-tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbours in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother-tongues united us with them. It now seems appropriate that our house had three levels: a downstairs for the Tamil world, an upstairs for the English and the Sanskrit, and a terrace on top that was open to the sky where our father could show us the stars and tell us their Sanskrit Names. (Ramanujan, CE 449-450)

Fifteen Poems from the Classical Tamil Anthology (1965) is an indispensable part of the big Treatise titled *The Interior Landscape* (1967) which is treasure trove of love (akam) poems from the classical Tamil anthology *Kuruntokai*- regarded as the earliest of the Eight anthologies of Classical Tamil Anthology. He experimented with poetry sequences, allusion and intertextuality in his poetry, and he had several traditions and models to follow to follow to. He was drawn naturally towards classical Tamil poems for their treatment to experience, human passion, and the external world. The *Tolkappayam* draws an analogy between *Akam* and *Puram* poetic genres, and alludes to the *Akam* genre five type of love and their symbolic utterances which Ramanujan calls 'Interior landscapes'. In *The Interior Landscape* (1967), he brings the western reader to Tamil classical poetics and its five landscapes or *tinai* for different types of love: *kurinci* (hillside); *mullai* (forest); *marutum* (fertile area or urban

scape); *neythal* (seashore); and *palai* (desert). According to the *Tolkappayam*, each region has specific native elements: gods, foods, livestock, fauna, flora, caste system, birds, occupations, and music et al.

Furthermore, each region is ruled by a deity and named after a flower or tree particular to the region. Time is measured in terms of days, months, and year. The year is divided tenaciously into some significant enormous time units: the rainy season, the cold season, early summer, and late summer, the early winter, the late winter. The day is naturally divided into five parts: sunrise, midday, sunset, nightfall, the death of night, and dawn. *Mullai* country is associated with rainy season and evening, *Kurinci* is related with early frost and midnight; *maurutam*, with the later part of night and dawn; *neythal* with the twilight; *palai* with the summer, late late frost and midday. The five landscapes or regions are adduced with proper *uri* or phase of love. Lover's union is associated with *kurinci*, the mountains, separation with *palai*, the desert; longing and waiting with *neytal*, the seashore; the lover's infidelity and angst with *marutum*, the pastoral region. Out of these five specific and symbolic phases, the first is clandestine or latent and occurs before marriage; the fourth after marriage; the remaining three phases could happen before or after marriage. His translation marches ahead felicitously and spontaneously, as one can experience from the following poem:

Bigger than earth, certainly,
 higher than the sky,
 more unfathomable than the waters
 as this love for the man
 of the mountain shapes
 where bees make rich honey
 from the flowers of the *kurinci*
 that has such black stalks (What She Said, Ramanujan 1965, 46)

In the above poem, we witness a sort of figurative and suggestive language employed by ancient Tamil poets. The *kurinci* flower and the mountain- scene clearly mark the poem as *kurinci* poem suggesting lovers union. The *Tolkappayam* calls this technique *ullurai* 'inner substance'. The poem is highly reflective of fathomless love existing between the lovers which notably scale the height of sky; it progresses from abstraction to experience. By the dint of his strenuous efforts and unflinching zest, he shows his prowess to retain the fragrance of the original by placing one word here and another there from the classical Tamil poetry. His employment of words adds a peculiar oriental to his translation.

Speaking of Siva (1972) is a scintillating collection of vachanas or free verse sayings from the Virasaiva religious poets who regarded Siva as the supreme deity, and thrive to deify him. Written by four major saints, the greatest exponents of this poetic form: Basavana, Dasimaya, Mahadevi yakka, Allama Prabhu. They eschewed not only the great traditions of

Vedic religion, but also the local conventions considerably. As Kannada was his native language, he found the poetry of the medieval Virasaiva saints exuding wisdom, and hues of literary and religious traditions. He observed in it mystical religious poetry with philosophical overtones, an outcry against the complacency of the society imbued with aesthetic and political message. The vachanas were dedicated to various forms of Siva: In Mahadeviyakka, the god is shown as possessing the desires of a lover, and regarded as 'The Lord White as Jasmine', to Basavana, Siva was shown as 'The Lord of Meeting Rivers'. We witness his propensity towards many environments and traditions, a plethora of ideas on art and aesthetics. The following poem from Basavana unravels the pithy view of art that distinguishes artist, devotee and god:

Make of my body the beam of a lute
of my head the sounding gourd
of my nerves the strings
of my fingers the plucking rods.

Clutch me close

And play your thirsty two songs

O lord of meeting rivers (Basavana poem, Ramanujan 1972, 38)

Hymns for the Drowning (1981) is a luminous translational proposition of Bhakti poetry, it foregrounds amazingly numerous medieval Tamil poems from the regal *Tiruvaymoli*, popularly known as the Tamil Veda composed by Nammalvar, who was venerated as the most conspicuous and prodigious Alvar poet. Alvars were staunch devotees of Vishnu, god of reincarnation and cosmic continuum. They consider the poetry as a natural manifestation of *lila* (god's play). The poems are woven around love, mythology, philosophy, and heroism inextricably. Vaishnavi theology reflects the vision of 'the one in the many', and is reflected in poetry of coherence, connections and closeness through transformation. Alvar poets attribute divinity to poetry, and allude it with passion. Nammalvar is of the view that poet carry a demon like genius: such passion and possessions springs from Vedic tradition of visionary poets and its notion of Soma, the intoxicating elixir of the Brahmanism and 'Lord of speech'. Nammalvar's poetry taught him the notion of grace and its relevance to poetic inspiration, and also established the fact vociferously 'everything lies in the very nature of human existence,' Mark the following lines suggestive of the link between possession and grace:

Soma, I said. Is no Vishnu

But Vishnu can play soma

Enter the rests of flesh

To make them sing. (Nammalvar poem from *Tiruvayamali* 118)

Samskara (A Rite of a Dead Man) is a very famous religious novel written by Prof. Ananthamurthy, a highly venerated South-Indian creative writer. The novel analyses the caste system, culture, religious dogmas, traditions, social inhibitions, and reversible relationship between old cultural values and new arising in the contemporary world. It highlights various moral, social and philosophical issues vociferously, and tenaciously touches upon the grim subjects: piousness of life, relevance of customs and traditions, and the radical concept of Brahmanism in current world. Unravelling the ramifications and meaning of the word 'samskara' which means the funeral rites of dead man, rituals, preparation, transformation etc. The novel reflects the views on Hindu myths, customs, ritual, nomenclature, flora, fauna, and explores various dimensions and denotation of the substance of the novel. The novel lays emphasis on the mysterious death of Naranappa resulting into plague, and loss of many precious lives in the Brahmin colony in a Karnataka village. During the course of the whole story, the novel rakes up the issues underlying social taboos and rituals, which culminates in moral chaos and deterioration. The crisis is resolved, to some an extent, when the Praneshacharya is born to dispel the all mores characteristic to Brahmin rituals. His rebirth is bloomed into an amorous union with a joyous whore, Chandri. Both come across unexpectedly in forest at the fall of night and forced upon each other inescapably. Their consummation of love- physical union is described in very erotic and picturesque style:

Touching full breasts he had never touched, Praneshacharya felt faint. As in a dream, he pressed them. As the strength in his legs was ebbing, Chandri sat the Acharya down, holding him close. The Acharya's hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged, and he cried out like a child in distress, ' Amma' Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him Then she took off her sari, spread it on the ground, and lay on it hugging Praneshacharya close to her. (Ramanujan, 1981 *Samskara*, pp. 63-64)

Poems of Love and war (1985) is also very spectacular translational teatment, which abounds in luminous verses taken from the four Anthologies of Classical Tamil Literature- Kauntokai, Narrinai, Akananuru, and *Ankurunuru*. The treatise is assorted into four books: Book1 contains akam poems, Book2 is motley of puram poems, Book 3 is a collection of poems on general themes, Book 4 is a pastiche of religious poems. *Akam* poems are love poems, *puram* poems are about good and evil, action, society, kingdom- it is the public poetry of the ancient Tamils which eulogizes grace and glory of the kings, laments the death of heroes, and express empathy for the poor poets. Elegy, panegyric, invective, poems on wars and serious incidents are *puram* poems. Both type of poetry differ in form and structure. *Akam* poetry is about experience, not action; it is poetry of inner world. The characters in *akam* poems are iconic types, such as honchos heading clans and classes. The love of man and woman is taken as the best expression of the inner world. Love has many facts- love in separation and union, before or after marriage, fidel and infidel. Love and war became metaphors and intermingle with another. In the following poem, the evergreen sapling, *noici*, entwines the two themes of love and war ineluctably. A garland of *noici* is worn by a warrior in war poems; a *noici* leaf skirt draped by a woman gifted by the lover in love poems:

A leaf in love and war
the chaste trees, dark-clustered
blend with the land
that known no dryness;
the colours on the leaves
mob the eyes
we have seen those leaves
on jeweled woman,
on their mounds
of love.

Now the chaste wreath lies slashed
on the ground, so changed, so mixed
with blood, the vulture snatches it
with its beak,
thinking it raw meat
we see this too, just because a young man
in love with war
wore it for glory. (Ramanujan 1985, 186)

The following poem throws light on the first union of the lovers, the mood in the poem is melancholic; the purpose of the woman is to rope in the lover to marry:

What She Said

tell me:
how its then
that woman gather
like hill goddesses
and stare at me
wherever I go.

and say
she's good, she's good:
and I,
no good at all for my man
from the country of the hills? (Ramanujan 1985, 10)

Going through the cross-section of his translational corpus, now we must also throw light on his theory of translation. Translations are actually transpositions, explications, and interpretations. Some original can't be entirely transposed. A. K. Ramanujan describes numerous features to explicate the process and technical device utilized in translating the texts. His concept of translation is basically stemmed from his cross-cultural relations, traditions, his penchant for literary and cultural past. A. K. Ramanujan's theory and practice of tradition can be traced in classical, medieval and contemporary poetry or from his own creative process and interconnecting them. It was his endeavor to translate a poem to enliven the spirit of original, and its structure exploring all the resources of the English language and the tradition it belongs to. The process of dialogue involves a dialogue, and sometimes a conflict, between the translator and the original author. The Translator has to thrive a balance between its loyalty to the original and the self-reflexive function of expressing his own self. Consequently the translator is irrevocably an artist on oath. He called his translated poems of Kannada bhakti as a transcreation rather than a genuine translation.

However, Translation entails a process of selection: of words, syntax, poems, poets, tradition, era etc. His translations often courted criticism from Niranjana Tejaswini and virasaiva scholar H.S. Prakash of consciously creating a Eurocentric, Orientalist and essential version of Kannada Virasaiva bhakti in his translation to abreast the western reader. Shivprakash succinctly comments:

His translations are excellent reading in English but are impervious and insensitive to nuances of source texts. Translation of proper names like ' Lord of Meting Rivers' is unpardonable... and dialogic vachanas (in source text) read like monologic, confessional, Sylviaplath- like poetry. (Shivprakash, 2015).

Undoubtedly, A. K. Ramanujan was an accomplished and pioneering translator-scholar of Dravidian literature, and traditions in the context of Modernism, or structuralism and Post-modernism or, or post- structuralism. A. K. Ramanujan was of the belief that writing poetry and translations are two parallel activities that are symbiotically nurtured. Translation of classical and medieval poets inspired him and traditional ethos shaped his poetic talent. His penchant and admiration for Dravidian classics helped him develop his own style. He averred that to translate a poem implies to create a new poem:

A poem can be translated only by another poem. There is no such thing as a literal translation. No amount of that kind of scholarly translation will convey the poem, from one language to another. And to walk the tightrope between one's scholarly knowledge of the original and the enterprise of making a new poem is an experience itself. (Ramanujan quoted in Jha, 'Between two worlds', p13)

A. K. Ramanujan extensively enlivens and recaptures the blazing fervor and flavor of the past tradition by the dint of translating classical and medieval poetry he was enamored of. He says: 'Translation is the way in which I repress a poem, because as a writer I'd like to possess a re-experience of past traditions. So I'm not simply translating for scholarly reasons. This why, although there are so many ancient great works, I don't do them all. I translate what I want, what I care for, what touches me as writer...' A. K. Ramanujan's translations delighted readers because of its adherence to original and aesthetic gloss. In the process of translation of the text from one language to another, the translation transforming to another poem.

Surprisingly, His translations are testimony of his scholarly and artistic prowess, and met meticulously all the expectations. His translational oeuvre entwines his scientific acumen, insight of an anthropologist and incredible creative imagination inextricably and successfully pervades across his entire work. He considered translation a conspicuous conduit of expressing thoughts, life and tradition and writing in different languages, cultures and countries. The following lines speak highly of his scholarship and skill:

Though only poems can translate poems, a translator is 'an artist on oath'. He has a double allegiance, indeed, several double allegiances. All too familiar with the rigors and pleasures of reading text and those of making another, caught between the need to express himself and the need to represent another, moving between the halves of one brain, he has to use both to get close to 'the original.' He has to let poetry win without allowing scholarship to lose. (Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, pp. 296-297)

A. K. Ramanujan's translational passion spurred him to enliven the spirit of the past, and thereby enabling him to ingratiate his artistic and aesthetic urge. His translations and poetic venture became a potential laboratory where like a scientist he invented newer products and connections. Translation became his creative landscape wherein his poetic genius bloomed. His methodology was inspired by De Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Sigmund Freud, Jung, Chomsky and Derrida, but he ensconced them as a guiding force not as a mathematical formula. He observed and dissipated the minutiae of life and the world to larger learned concepts. Like a skillful craftsman, he shaped, polished and perfected all his works thriving to attain directness, sharpness and clarity. The four articles of faith: nonverbal, interiorized contexts, system adherence and mimicry help in catapulting him into a colossal, consummate and accomplished translator. The translation must represent the original in general and enliven the past in particular. It is an uphill task for a translator to obtain the equilibrium between the source and target language, and maintaining the ethos eclectically intact. A translator is certainly an 'artist on oath'. Some elements of the origin can't be transposed at all. It is pretty hard on the part of a translator to conserve the metre; he may

carry the sense of the original rhythm, one can imitate the pattern of diction, but not the actual sound of the original words.

Thus we may conclude that A. K. Ramanujan was a prolific translator of two ancient languages of India-Tamil and Kannada, and it was he, who by the dint of his extra-ordinary skill brought this genre at the pinnacle of perfection. His poetry places him at the Parnassus of Indian English literature, and his translations stand him out as a chronicler of the soul of India all across the globe. His translations definitely unfurl the flag of Dravidian cultural ethos and exquisite variety of Dravidian literature, and reflecting its light to whole world relentlessly. We must sign off concurring A. K. Mehrotra's appreciation of A. K. Ramanujan:

It was not his cunningly poem, but the five volumes of not less than artfully plotted translations from Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu, with their elaborate diagram-filled introductions and afterwords, that made Ramanujan's international reputation. (A. K. Mehrotra)

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