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Resistance and Negotiation as Coping Strategy in A. K. Ramanujan's Poems

Abina Habib

Department of English,
Amar Singh College, Srinagar,
Kashmir, India

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Abstract:

Through the fifty years after India achieved its independence almost all Indian English writers have grappled with the concept of resisting the force of the canon and creating an individualized, unique, negotiated space for their literature. Indian poet, translator and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan relocates and hybridizes his Indian consciousness on a foreign soil to create an image of nation/ home that redefines the western concept of an exoticized India, home then emerges as a predominant theme in his poetry. He stirs up a sense of changing notion of home in the modern socio-cultural context. In the authors' reading of his work, the environment is closely linked to the idea of home that is central to the field of postcolonialism. It highlights the significance of history to the study of literature. The discussion in this paper focuses on how Ramanujan conceptualizes home through the waves of his employment of memory of his homeland in his poetic production. His poems, which he writes more intensely when he is exiled from the motherland, could be used to illustrate how a postcolonial perspective might contribute to an understanding of the poet's depiction of home through employment of tools like resistance and negotiation.

Keywords: Resistance, Negotiation, Hybridity, Postcolonial, Home, Nation.

Introduction

To begin with it is important to get a technical definition of both resistance and negotiation out of the way, to facilitate a clear understanding of the response of present day writers to colonization, decolonization and neocolonialism. When defined in opposition to resistance, negotiation is often understood as the weakening of a position and a compulsion to compromise in order to reach an agreement. So, resistance tends to imply an end-oriented result, in contrast to the definition of negotiation as a process-oriented procedure. From an ordinary understanding of the word, negotiation and its success depend upon the final agreement, if at the beginning of the negotiating process, a final agreement is desired for but still unknown, the understanding is that, if successful, negotiations will lead to a clear and well defined outcome. The postcolonial writers for whom negotiation is premised on the absence of a definite and undisputed resolution, of course, contest this. From a more compromising perspective and based on the assumption that each negotiating party has some leverage, negotiation also suggests a participatory practice rather than a failure to resist. From this standpoint the process becomes more important than the result, this is not to say that the

latter becomes unimportant since the discussion ideally aims at an agreement, but the process of negotiation here is important in itself, and not simply a means to an end.

Considering the role of literature as a tool that attempts a reconfiguration of temporal and geographical frames of national conflicts, where the concept of nationalism is opposed to an understanding of globalization, with the expectation that the narrow nationalism will wither in the face of a supposedly more democratic, free, and productive globalization. From this point of view negotiation tends to be associated with the cosmopolitanism as a “transactional interaction process whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others’ desired self- images” (Ting-Toomey 217). This definition points to the negotiation of identity, which marks one of the main focal points of postcolonial textual understandings of cosmopolitanism. From this perspective, critics conceive of negotiation as the main strategy underlying colonizer and colonized interactions, which both generates hybrid subjects and subverts nationalist constructions of identity. Then, the idea of borderless cosmopolitanism has been presented as an inevitable and desirable development and a space in which identities are constantly negotiated and reshaped.

Ramanujan’s concept of nation, home, familial bonds and language is largely because he is the poet of memories. It is not that his seemingly unemotional utterances, exhibit a spirit of aloofness, but if we listen closely we hear the subdued tone of longing at times and nostalgia at others. He seems to be disillusioned by the post independence India but at the same time the pull of the motherland, its people, its landscape, is too powerful to disregard, hence the negotiating process of lifting images of home and expressing them as pieces of a puzzle of an expatriate memory, where each piece fits to create an image of home that resists the exoticized image propagated by the colonizer and a sentimental picture of home/ nation put forward by apologist native. His images of India have a searing reality and continually surprises by twists of language and turns of thoughts. Despite the twists and turns his poetry emerges as poetry that is totally committed to an idea of India. Harriet Zinnes, in her review of *The Striders*, says:

Mr. Ramanujan writes frequently about his childhood Indian experiences, and thus flavours the poems with images of fig trees, mynahs, snakes, Madurai, diction and attitude toward the object. (Zinnes 353)

Ramanujan resists the temptation of succumbing to the seductive lure of exclusionary myths of national unity based on race, religion, ethnicity or geographical location. He finds it important to negotiate the very fundamentals of pre-established definitions of nation/state, giving in neither to the idea of an exotic image of India conceived by the narrow minded colonizer, perpetuated and propagated by their travelogues, nor to the idea of a nation encouraged by the teary eyed, high on emotional drama, native. He avoids the clichéd nostalgia that is the creation of the colonizer more than that of the colonized and it serves to give the colonizer a sense of the continuity of his culture while exoticizing that of the ‘other’. He is well aware that normative concepts of the nation have to be reformulated to address the needs of the people. These communities are problematizing the ideology of a unified 'natural'

cultural norm, one that underpins the center/margin model of colonial discourse. Ramanujan avoids the “monism” of the “Pan-Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition” since he believes that “cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting”(CE 8) and he asserts, “India does not have one part, but many parts” (CE 187). Ramanujan maintains that India is multicultural as he reiterates in his popular essay, “Where Mirrors are Windows: Towards an Anthology of Reflections”:

I would like to suggest the obvious that cultural traditions in India are dissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles (a) context sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of old ones. What we call Brahmanism, bhakti, traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, tantra, tribal traditions and folklore and lastly modernity itself, are the most prominent of these systems. (CE 8)

These multitudes of “dissoluble” traditions, these ever changing cultural images are the source of Ramanujan’s poetic oeuvre. There is never any expectation of a perfect solution in his poems, but a journey that resists the official version, and in resisting he is coping and creating an authentic voice. Ramanujan not only emphasized the cultural plurality and variety of Indian indigenous culture and literatures, but set standards in the genre. Being a trilingual writer, Ramanujan assimilated the cultures of his native land and that of the land of his migration and successfully brings alive the indigenous transition and culture in his works, Like Derek Walcott, Ramanujan has made multicultural negotiations– being true to both Indian sensibility and the Western attitude, and in doing so, transcended the limitation of an expatriate poet. S.S. Dulai underlines this aspect of Ramanujan's poetry as:

His poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experience on the one hand, and 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, yet maintaining a perfectly taut connection between its constant and continuously evolving central vision and the expanding scene before it ...(Dulai 151)

The concept of home is essential to an individual’s identity. Home for him is always a possessive image of a nation/house; such imagery for him was necessary for legitimizing his identity as an Indian. Therefore, constructing the nation through constructing images of home remains a negotiating strategy for Ramanujan. Being a displaced citizen of the world he finds solace in his nation/home, to which he keeps returning, as an instinctive insider. His poems voice his umbilical connection with his homeland. They do not deliver mere images and metaphors of a typical south Indian home but convey landscapes, villages, fields, people and even communicate an attitude. What seems indestructible in Ramanujan's home bound vision even though the physicality and materiality of home is left behind or what continues to occupy the mind of the poet is the image of home that has been left behind. Memories of home emerge as a bridge that connects the past to the poet's present. In this context Molly Daniels Ramanujan comments:

His internal roadway comes out of a deeper level of consciousness. At that level nothing is imposed from, the outside; it is mediated by a voice within ...in "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House", ... The poet has created a fictional life of a joint family... the supposed history of this extended family is made up to stand for what the poet wants to say about Indian history...The macro and the micro, the *Puram* and *Okram* are intertwined in the service of the deeper meaning of the poem. (Daniels xxvi)

Thus the poem, "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House", sums up the life of the generations of family, where time seems to stand still. At a symbolic level the poem signifies the nation in which everything new becomes part of the past, and is changed, just as the past is changed by experience of now, by not changing at all:

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things come in everyday

to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago
other things lost long ago; (CP 96)

Ramanujan claims that it is difficult to separate the 'inner' and 'outer' forms in his poems, but as is obvious in "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House", because of the predominantly home/nation motif the former overpowers the latter, and the lines are forever blurred. Ramanujan's intention is to overcome the burden of insecurity and marginalization through the image of the house. The cold caustic stance of "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" reiterates the captivatingly claiming powers of a house that shelters a joint family. Ramanujan has been able to make this house a living character whose peculiarity shapes the poet's personality, more particularly the inner substance. In his rather oblique and ironic manner, the poem emerges as a commentary on family metaphor, which in Dharwadker's words turns into a 'national allegory'. The house is both large and ever changing, yet remaining constant. Contents are always being added to it or even if sometimes they are lost they tend to return. This constancy resists the pre-conceived image of the nation/home:

Anything that goes out
will come back, processed and often
with long bills attached. (CP 97)

The house is like the nation; not a romanticized image of the nation as perhaps Nehru's vision of India but a keenly ironic sense of the chaotic nature of India. The clutter, the skeletons in the cupboard such as the daughters who "get married to short lived idiots" and then return, like the stray cows appropriated by the household. Such a great and absorbing house where everything is absorbed and synthesized comes to symbolize the nation, where various influences are absorbed from time to time, retaining, nurturing and designating anything or anyone that strays into it. The crowded memory of the nation never

leaves the poet. The 'lame wandering cows', 'servants' 'sons in laws', 'wives', 'library books', 'sweet dishes', 'photographs', are even hereditary diseases stay permanently. The things that do eventually go out come back, but in a changed manner. Those who go out for opportunities come back disillusioned. Mailed letters find their way back. The daughters married to idiots come back too. Even through death, people return in the form of the martyred soldier. Despite displacement, Ramanujan has been making inroads to this house so that he remains an insider, always an inhabitant of this house.

Ramanujan's poems create a need to think about resistance and negotiation in terms of attempts at transformation. They encourage us to shun the ideological and nationalist foundations of anti-colonial resistance movements to theorize other forms of resistance. The tendency so far had resulted in an over simplified representation of the colonial world. This tendency of an over simplification locks the very notion of resistance in a strictly temporal setting of pre-independence state or an often lengthy and constantly delayed definition of evolving resistance. From either point of view, resistance to cultural and political ownership can no longer function as the sole strategy for social and political change in a post-independence situation. Again, this does not mean that the power to resist can only be assessed according to its success or that it should be limited to its collective and organized definitions. Locating resistance only in sloganeering risks rendering it incidental rather than intentional.

In "Extended Family" he tries to juxtapose two sets of images -- one pointing to the home that has been left behind and the other his present circumstance. To relive the past he practices ritual behavior of the members of his family in order to create fantastical mix of past and present, "Yet like grandfather /I bathe before the village crow"(CP 169). Sometimes home for Ramanujan remains, as Avtar Brah argues in the case of diasporic writers, "a mythical place of desire in the imagination and a place of no return"(Brah v). It assumes a dream like quality, a shadow of a desired place and retains in it the source of ambivalence, ambivalence that is representative of times long gone but missed forever. There is a longing of return to the past, an untainted, undiluted condition that is impossible to achieve. Accompanying this sense of loss is the realization of the impossibility of the desire. The only recourse for the author is to negotiate in the present, find that mythical place of desire in the present. In Ramanujan's "Returning" that was included in the posthumously published *Uncollected Poems and Prose* he creates the ethos of a dream to suggest the ambivalent nature of his longing:

Returning home one blazing afternoon,
he looked for his mother everywhere,
She was not in the kitchen, she wasn't
in the backyard, she wasn't anywhere.

He looked and looked, grew frantic,
looked even under the beds, where he found
old shoes and dustbins, but not his mother
He ran out of the house, shouting Amma!

Where are you? I am home! I am hungry!
But there was no answer, not even an echo
in the deserted street blazing with sunshine
Suddenly he remembered he was now
sixty-one
and he hadn't had a mother for
forty years. (UP 14)

The poet is haunted by the memories of his mother/motherland, which occupies the central position in the house, like the mother in Nissim Ezekiel's "The Night of the Scorpion. Instead of offering portraits of loss and grievance, he utilizes his talents to subvert the patriarchal domination of the subcontinent by making the mother a representative of the nation/home. Ramanujan painfully recollects the parting from his mother in "Farewells":

Mothers 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.(CP 259)

It is therefore difficult to get away from the assumption that the poet's past is far from forgotten. As Jahan Ramazani referring to Ramanujan points out:

Like the postcolonial or migrant subject, torn out of one cultural context and inserted into a new one, the eye that blinks in a new head or the heart that beats in a new chest cannot always adopt with ease to its new surroundings.
(Ramzani 43)

Thus the sampled poems strive to widen the scope of responsibility of the writer to his nation and to bring on center stage the causes of conflict that changed forever the geopolitical landscape of the world. Vital questions are raised about the clichéd representations of Indian life and culture. They force a redefinition of the roles of the individual, the community, and the nation. Negotiation, then, functions as a tool that both questions and appeals to different spaces of resistance, inscriptions of memory, and possibly transformation. The writer draws attention to beautiful artifacts that are Ramanujan's creation by linking the marginality of hybrid literature in postcolonial theorizing with the centrism of family theme so dominant in the subcontinent. The blending of the two illustrates how a consensus can be arrived at, which might not be definitive in its scope but aims at a synthesis, nonetheless. In addition, Ramanujan definitely contributes to the facets of craftsmanship never before attempted in Indian English poetry. Thus Ramanujan's use of linguistic techniques is a means of negotiating the conflicting cultures to achieve a solid and positive sense of identity, it

becomes the basis of his agenda as a literary activist and shows how his identity is inseparable from the physicality of home. What I want to suggest here is that the Ramanujan's writings contribute to the current reformulations of the debate between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in an Indian literary scene.

Conclusion

In summary, the analysis of the selected poems of Ramanujan discloses that he remains undeterred in his writing mission to show the symbiotic link between him and his land. Whether it is the mythology, folklore, the landscape, language or family, each element is an extension of the poet in the poem who knows of his place even though he is displaced. It also reveals how Ramanujan utilized poetry as a tool for constituting home among alien people in the world. Further, it is shown that the poet's employment of home, nation, mother and family images in his poetry becomes the basis of his agenda as a literary activist to arouse a collective experience of nationness.

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