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Postcolonial Reading of Select Poems of A.K. Ramanujan

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Abstract:

The proposed paper will attempt at making a close scrutiny of A.K.Ramanujan's poems 'Snakes', 'A poem on particulars', and 'Small-scale reflections on a great house', in the light of postcolonialism. Though many a literary attempt in the past and present years has already shown highlighting postcolonial and postmodern traits in many Indian poems in English, they have not foregrounded the points of deviation. The present paper will take up the use of the English language and projection of macrocosmic self (nation) through the microcosmic self (family) for analysis and demonstrate how A.K.Ramanujan's poems mentioned above can be seen as exemplifying them in clear-cut as well as concrete terms. Besides showing the scope for interpreting these three poems from this perspectives, the proposed paper will also argue that it is the interplay of binary opposites such as the colonizer and the colonized in terms of handling the form and individual self and the collective self in terms of the content that makes possible the postcolonial reading of these four poems.

Keywords: post colonialism, Indianisation, reminiscent, popular culture, bilingual.

What is commonly referred to 'as Indian writing in English' did not enjoy the status of a canon for the simple reason that it was looked down upon by critics as a mere imitation of British literature. The historical survey of Indian writing in English done by critics such as K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, M.K.Naik, A.K.Malhotra, and many others has made it clear that Indian writing in English, in its formative years that is in pre independence era, did not have direct link with the cultural movement which led to the national independence. In fact, the absence of a direct linkage with the cultural movements in the early phase of Indian writing in English has led to what can be called an unhealthy dichotomy between regional and national literatures of India. Indeed, it is for this reason that, for a long time Indian writing in English in general and modern Indian poetry in English in particular, has not been treated by critics on par with those of Africans and Caribbean. Bruce King in his book, entitled, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* states that unlike the creative writing of Africa and the Caribbean, modern Indian Poetry in English has been neglected by most

critics, foreign readers and Intellectuals for it has no obvious direct relationship to the cultural movements which led to the Indian independence.

No sooner did India become politically independent in 1947 than the Indian writers in English realized the importance of erasing the dichotomy between regional writing and Indian English writing so as to project the latter purely “Indianized”. It is the erasure of the dichotomy between these two branches of writing that has given scope for the modern critics to interpret Indian writing in English from the perspectives of both postcolonial and postmodern studies. However, one needs to be cautious about while making this observation chiefly because, the authors of Indian writing in English, being the products of the Western system of education, have no clue about the lifestyle and morale of the poor and rural masses of India. To bridging the gulf between regional literature and Indian writing in English, they have added the ‘Indian’ to their writing in English in spite of their using the colonizer’s language as their medium.

Among the post independence Indian English poets, A.K.Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, and Dom Moraes take their stand for their finest attempts at making modern Indian English Poetry, a genuine expression of Indian culture. Bruce King in his book *Three Indian poets* refers them as the founders of modern Indian English poetry:

As poetry became more oral, self-conscious, deconstructive, aware of popular culture, anarchistic and arbitrary, or more like narratives and less lyrical—became that odd mixture of pre-modernist models and the contemporary theoretical concepts—the earlier revolution in Indian poetry by Ezekiel, Moraes, and Ramanujan began to seem familiar and no longer outrageous.(1)

A.K.Ramanujan it can be said, out of the three prominent poets, is a representative of what postcolonial critics call ‘the hybrid condition’. Being born in a Tamil speaking family and educated in Kannada medium school, A.K.Ramanujan was well versed at Tamil and Kannada before he could master the English language in his college days. Therefore, the influence of Dravidian languages has had an unconscious impact on the use of the English language in his poetry. He has succeeded not only in expressing his own cultural roots in his writings but also in purging English language of all its foreign elements so as to render the rhythm of his own native idiom in English. In doing so, he has perhaps unconsciously responded to Raja Rao’s own theory of Indian writing in English which he propounded in his own fore word to his novel, *Kanthapura*:

One has to convey the various shades and omission of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is the language of really an intellectual make-up--- like Sanskrit or Persian was before---but not of our emotional make-up. We are instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.(v)

In his attempt to make the interplay of regional and English studies possible through his prolific translation as well as English poems, A.K.Ramanujan has perhaps unconsciously adhered to postcolonial process of ‘cross cultural interaction’. While adhering to this process, the post colonial writers usually undergo three important phases: explaining these three phases with reference to African writing Peter Barry says:

All postcolonial literatures, it might be said, seem to make this transition. They begin with an unquestioning acceptance of the authority of European models (especially in the novel) and with the ambition of writing works that will be master pieces entirely in this tradition. This can be called the ‘*Adopt*’ phase of colonial literature, since the writer’s ambition is to adopt the form as it stands, the assumption being that it has universal validity. The second stage can be called the ‘*Adapt*’ phase, since it aims to adapt the European norms to American subject matter, thus assuming partial rights of intervention in the genre. In the final phase there is, so to speak, a declaration of cultural independence.... This might be called the ‘*Adept*’ phase. (196).

Taking a cue from Barry, one can say that A.K.Ramanujan too seems to have undergone the process so quickly that from his early poems published in the volumes ‘*The Striders*’ he has shown himself to be an ‘*Adept*’ in writing English poetry. It must be noted that the A.K.Ramanujan’s poems, provide a wide scope for the poet to appropriate his native South Indian theme so adroitly to English language against the charge of his writings being colonial. Bruce King more or less makes the same point when he sums up the process of A.K.Ramanujan’s adaptation of Indian themes to English language thus:

.....Ramanujan imaginatively combines past and present in his own verse. Many of his English-language poems use allusions, puns, phrases, themes, idioms, images and conventions based on Dravidian and Sanskrit poetry. As his themes often concern the relationship of the past to present, such a transformation of the Indian into English seems appropriate...(2).

In an attempt to show how thematic concern enables A.K.Ramanujan to appropriate Indian subject matter to English language, the present paper takes up such poems as ‘*Snakes*,’ ‘*A poem on particulars*,’ from ‘*The striders*’ for analysis. In this poem, the poet takes off from the present to revisit the past of his own house where his mother offering milk to the snake, brought by the snake charmer. While revisiting this incidence of the past, he uses images such as “aisles of bookstacks”, “the yellow vein” and “the yellow amber”(4-5) of the books in the library. The poet becomes terribly afraid of the snakes. However, the fear of snakes which is experienced by the poet is only imaginary since he is physically not in the past. Still, the trauma of snakes from his reminiscence testifies to the fact that “there is little nostalgia in Ramanujan’s poetry but the past exists in the memory and cannot be ignored” (King.77). It is at this point that one must notice the point of deviation inherent in the application of postcolonial theory to modern Indian English poetry: Unlike African and Caribbean writings disdaining post coloniality being anti colonial, Indian writing in English does not behave anti colonial towards

post coloniality. In other words, in spite of not being always anti colonial, modern Indian English poetry can still be analyzed in the light of post colonial studies. In the present poem, this Idea becomes explicit when the poet makes a conscious attempt to repress the memories of his own past. Nevertheless, despite his conscious attempt to suppress the past the poet does not succeed.

The abrupt beginning of the present poem “No, it does not happen.....” (4) is indicative of a conversational rhythm which A.K.Ramanujan effortlessly renders. In fact, the rendering of such a rhythm in Indian English poetry bears a testimony to the poet’s ability to adapt the English language so aptly to his own native thought process. Besides, the dominance of sibilants (s) throughout the poem is in keeping with the visual as well as auditory image of the serpent. What strikes the readers the most is that the image of the snake in the poem is so well developed that the readers ultimately experience the fear of the snake themselves psychologically rather than physically.

Though the present poem juxtaposes the past and the present, it does not give any clue in the end whether the poet has actually got rid of the fear of snakes. This becomes clear in the last line “and I can walk through the woods” (5). Implicit in this apparently unambiguous statement, is the fact that in the beginning of the poem too the poet is not Afraid of snakes while walking through the woods “No, it does not happen // when I walk through the woods” the paradox here is that the poem ends where it began in other words, the so-called relief from the fear of snakes is evident in the last line since the poet has already made it clear that the fear of snakes exist in his mind as a part of his childhood memory. Therefore, by repeating the same statement in the end, the poet suggests that the fear of snakes that exists in his mind is only a ‘condition’ which is fluid by nature. In short, the open-endedness of the poem becomes illustrative of the poet’s psychological response to his own fear of snakes.

In another poem, ‘*A poem on particulars*’ in ‘The Striders’, the poet’s attempt to explore the past continues. While attempting to do so A.K.Ramanujan makes himself in this poem impersonal so much so that he draws an interesting parallel between the pattern of oranges as arranged in a basket like that of human beings. But, the very purpose of giving it the title ‘A poem on particulars’ takes the readers by surprise. When one proceeds from the title to the poem, one may perhaps get a clue to treat the image of oranges as suggesting the presentation of truth through fragments. Keeping in mind that the present poem is the last one in ‘The Striders’ one may say that this poem serves as a transition between the first and the second volumes of A.K.Ramanujan’s namely ‘The Striders’(1966) and ‘The Relations’(1971). Vinay Dharwadker’s comment in his introduction to the book ‘A.K.Ramnanujan’s collected poems’ acquires significance in this context:

Ramanujan’s poetry is like a circular labyrinth, in which all paths lead back to the point from where we start, no matters where we begin: the body in nature embodies natural time, which is the clock ticking inside history, which in turn is the clock work mechanism inside a society that is paradoxically contained by its most prototypical part, the extended family, at the center of which stands the self, housed in a real and imagined body. (xxxvi).

Linking it with the theme of ‘connect’, another poem of A.K.Ramanujan’s, Dharwadker says further “When this madness insists on disconnecting one concrete particular from another, and each particular from the general process or pattern it supposedly manifests, the poet’s innermost ‘watchers’ remain silent spectators, as if ‘they knew [that] my truth is in fragments’”(xxxvi). When analyzed from this perspective the present poem would show Ramanujan’s attempt to explore the past with a view to find the causes of present as a futile and a never-ending process. The last line in the poem:

“you can sometimes count
 Every orange
 On a tree
 but never
 all the trees
 in a single
 orange”(54)

makes this point clear to the readers.

The response of the present poem to the recurring theme of ‘The Striders’--- the memory of the past is unavoidable and it cannot be emptied --- gives scope for the readers to interpret the entire poem as illustrating the postmodernist phenomenon of ‘palimpsest writing’. What Bruce King says in his comment on the last line of this poem, seems to explain this point further: “The mind cannot avoid the past; we live in memory, although often falsified memories, as much as ever changing yet part of history in the same way as a growing fruit which has its origin in earlier trees and seeds” (73).

Like the use of interplay between past and present there is also in Ramanujan’s poetry the use of the interplay between ‘family and nation’ Ramanujan uses the former interims of the latter. For instance, in his poem ‘*Small scale reflection on a great house*’ the great house and all its activities are suggestive to those of which are associated with the nation. Before highlighting the implicit and the hitherto undiscovered parallel between the family and the nation found in the poem, the central idea of the poem is given here for a better understanding.

The house is seen as past, as memory, as tradition, as origin, and different views are offered of it. As it is self-centered, its relation to the outside world is filled with ironies. What leaves it always returns but now more expensive and possibly returned from the wrong address (changed and costly with foreign tastes but without real knowledge of the outside world). When new ideas come to the house they are transformed to ideas the people in the house already hold. The poem ends with the final irony of the dead bodies of relatives in military service returning to the house from significant places of the world’s attention by long complicated routes (‘in plane / and train and military truck’) without distributing either the house’s complacency or the notorious slowness of the Indian telegraphic service (‘Even before the telegrams reached / on a perfectly good / chatty afternoon’).

As has been mentioned above, what is implicit in the present poem is the use of microcosmic self (family) interims of the macrocosmic self (nation). The very title of the poem has in it two epithets which are opposite (small and great). However, these two opposites have been used in the same title perhaps to suggest what happens in a house that holds good for the nation as well. Unlike many of the postcolonial writers who have the tendency to glorify the past of their own nation in their writings, A.K.Ramanujan does not indulge in the heroic self praise of his own nation. Instead, he depicts Indian society from the stand point of what Apparna Dharwadker calls in her book ‘The theatres of independence’ “Ironic self-reflexivity” (322). One may perhaps highlight the significance of such ironic as well as self-reflexive aspect of this poem, in the light of an essay by Ramanujan entitled ‘Classics lost and found’: “Just as our biological past lives in the many cultural bodies we inherit—our languages, arts, religions, and life-cycle rites.” (132).

Through the use of irony in the present poem A.K.Ramanujan practices another postcolonial phenomenon called ‘subversion’. The shift of emphasis in the depiction of nation from heroic self praise to ironic self-reflexivity exemplifies the ‘subversion’. It can be understood better if one has the knowledge of W.B.Yeats’ poem *Meditations in time of Civil War* which Ramanujan used as a source for his poem. While W.B.Yeats uses in his poem, his ancestral house to dignify his own nation (Ireland), Ramanujan uses his own ancestral house to expose the pejorative aspects of his own nation / tradition. However, the entire poem cannot be treated as the sarcastic version of Indian nation. Infact the opening line of the poem “Sometimes I think that nothing // that ever comes into this house // goes out”, throws light on the absorbing nature of Indian culture which does not resist or react against any alien force with repugnance.

The three poems of A.K.Ramanujan’s which have been analyzed are illustrative of the major shift that Indian writing in English has undergone from slavish imitation to creative response. While undergoing this major shift, the Indian English writers too have used the English language rather as a means of empowerment than as a medium of enslavement. What is even more significant is that most of the Indian writings in English have attained the status of what P.Lal calls ‘transcreation’ since many of the works written in English by Indian writers are translated from their own regional languages. Ramanujan too is one such writer who has not only translated many of the Kannada and Tamil works into English but also succeeded in rendering the rhythm of his own native idioms through his English poetry. In doing so, he has responded, either consciously or unconsciously, to both postcolonial and postmodern concepts. One may conclude here that the possibilities of interpreting Indian poetry in general and Ramanujan’s poetry in particular, on the basis of contemporary discourses have only being hinted at in this paper and not exhausted.

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