

Diasporic Sensibility in A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry

YASMEEN GALARIA

Abstract. The term 'diasporic' is of Greek origin which literally means a scattering or dispersion of a group of people to a foreign land. Sensibility refers to the emotional impression, susceptibility and sensitiveness of an individual integrated as a cultural domain. A. K. Ramanujan is an expatriate poet who had opted to settle abroad but tried to maintain his Indian roots by constantly writing poems on India and Indian subjects. He believed in influencing Indian outlook and system from the outside. While the other poets like Ezekiel and Shiv K. Kumar returned to India, disillusioned by their experiences of the west, he decided to remain in the west even after fully realizing its true nature. He considers himself as the hyphen between 'Indo-American' representing the lingering nostalgia of a Diaspora. Till the age of thirty three he lived in traditional south Indian family. His psyche was deeply rooted in tradition and culture. His linguistic oeuvre was made up of English, Tamil, Kannada and Sanskrit. Alienation and detachment sprung in his poetry when he migrated to Chicago. The western culture made him see the Indian culture in a new light. Ramanujan depicted India through language and themes being physically absent but mentally present. As a poet of the Indian diaspora, one of Ramanujan's concerns in his poetry is to evaluate his experience as an Indian living in the United States. Like many immigrants, he lived in two distinct culture and linguistic worlds. There is also a cross-culture influence in his poetry. The commonly found elements in his poetry are 1. History 2. Myth 3. Superstitions 4. Family 5. Political situations 6. Displacement 7. The impact of modernization or globalization on Indian society. In representing them in his poetry he frequently employs the poetic style of irony and parody in an effective manner. In his effort for relocating himself, he has created a new idiom, the Indian English idiom in his poetry. This not only helps him in joining his roots but also distinguishes him from other third world poets who also write in English. Lastly the use of typical Indian themes, symbols and metaphors gives his poems an Indian liveliness and make him acceptable to the Indian literary circle without much difficulty.

Keywords : Diaspora; cross-culture; Indianness; Indian -English idiom; Indian-ethos.

Expatriation is often thought of as a breach or rift, as a break between the self and its home that is beyond repair. Some of the leading writers of the twentieth century, in fact those who revolutionized literature were all expatriates. The entire bunch of American modernists such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and many others were living and writing as much about America as about Europe. Similarly James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Conrad, Henry James and many others did their writing in countries other than those of their native origins or regions and it

were these writers who were the leading lights of the modernist movement in the twentieth century.

A large number of Indian writers in the twentieth century have written from the countries other than their own where they have been living as expatriates. Writers like R.K.Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arun Joshi, Anita Desai and many more are decidedly the ones who have received international acclaim and are writing sensibly about Indians and their problems. In fact, it is more of an advantage than disadvantage to write about one's native land and people from a distance. Just as one gets to see clearly the outline of the painting by standing at a distance the same way, one gets to have greater clarity about one's own country by living in another.

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929-1993) occupies a prominent position in Indian English poetry due to his intellectual stamina, his ineluctable language and ability to depict the inner struggle. As a trilingual writer, he wrote in English, Tamil and Kannada. Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 into a family of Srivaishnava Tamil Brahmins. His father was a Professor of Mathematics who died when Ramanujan was in his twenties. The young boy took series of demanding and ill-paid temporary lectureships in English across south India. But the fortuitous grant that took him first to Pune to study Linguistics, and then the scholarship that took him to the U.S for a Ph.D on Kannada grammar which he completed around the time of his thirtieth birthday. He taught at the Chicago University for 32 years and was a visiting Professor at various other U.S and U.K universities. At the University of Chicago, Ramanujan established the South Asian Studies programme and worked in the Department of South Asian Language and Civilization. In 1976, the government of India awarded him the honorific "Padma Shri", and in 1983, he was given the Mac Arthur Fellowship. Apart from his translations, Ramanujan's poetic output in English may be found in the volume like *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1986) and *The Black Hen* (1995). His extensive stay in the U.S has made him realize what R.Parthasarthy writes in his 'Exile' :

There is something to be said for exile
You learn roots are deep. (Exile,15)

This expatriation has become a dynamic and enriching force in Ramanujan and he has made the best use of the neither-here-nor-there strider like situation. Straddling between cultures, poetry helps him make sense of this predicament and the conscious decision to live in it. Thus his expatriate status has become a boon to the literary world. The more he lives and writes abroad, the more he becomes aware of his deep Indianness. Indianness is not merely a part of his past but what continues to live in him, condition and regulate his behaviour, attitude and values.

Though the critics have labeled Ramanujan as an exile poet in an interview with A.L.Becker and Keith Taylor, Ramanujan clearly refuses to be called one. On being asked “Do you consider yourself an exile?” Ramanujan says “No, an exile is a person who has been thrown out of his country. I’m not one. I have come to this country voluntarily.... I don’t even call myself an expatriate, because I’ve done a lot of work on India since coming to this country. I’ve done it more comfortably here than I could even have done it in India... And the other interesting thing is that one can be an internal alien in India, as one goes from one province to another. I have not lived in my own language region since my 20th year. If you go a hundred miles away, you are in a language that you cannot read or speak.... I think it is in the dialogue of three cultures- which I refer to as downstairs, upstairs and outside the house- and in the conflict between these three languages, that I am made.” (52-53). For Ramanujan, Tamil is the downstairs language- the language of his family. Kannada is the language of the city, Mysore or the language outside the house. And English is the language upstairs or the father language as his father did much of his work in English and he literally lived upstairs as his library was also there.

Most of his works in the U.S. are related to his roots in India- Dravidian Linguistic, Anthropology and translation of Indian literary texts. His primary agenda is not to interpret or promote his exotic “Hindoo India” to an alien audience; it is a simple act of being true to himself and his relatedness from which he derives accomplishments, Ramanujan confesses in his well-known statement :

English and my discipline (linguistic, anthropology) give me my “outer” forms linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience, and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and fieldtrips, my personal and professional preoccupation with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my “inner forms,” images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes where. (96)

His poem ‘Waterfalls in a Bank’ presents a picture of the poet arrested in a moment of contemplation of a waterfall that has been set up in a Chicago bank. The setting represents the epitome of western financial power, prestige and materialism- the objective world of economics and business. But the sight of the waterfall is the stimulus that takes the poet to an inner world far removed from the bank in which he stands. A flurry of images and metaphors arise in his mind, some of which go back to his memories of his childhood in India. The key image of the crippled old sadhu, the wandering ascetic embodies a non-material impoverished but spiritual way of being in the world that is the opposite of everything implied by the prosperous bank in Chicago’s Hyde park.

We find evidence in this poem that in the “transaction” between two cultures that the poet enacts in his life, he believes that the loss is greater than the gain. Using the language of financial exchange, he says, “always at a loss when I count my change”. And as if to verify that statement in contrast to the rich, variegated stream of images in which he recalls Indian, the last section of the poem portrays only the coldness and the chaos of Chicago during a winter snowstorm.

In the poem ‘The Extended Family’ the poet contrasts the two sets of values and then figures out “the inevitability of his return from the peripheral perambulation to the centre of his self which is rooted in his own native culture”. (Mohanty, 44). The poem begins with the portrayal of the poet’s grandfather, whom the poet imitates in the matter of bathing before the village crow. Even if he bathes like his grandfather, he is bereft of the holy water of the Ganges and hence he uses the dry chlorine water :

dry chlorine water
my only Ganges
the naked Chicago bulb
a cousin of the Vedic sun. (*Collected Poems*, 169)

Instead of a glimpse of the vedic sun, there he finds “the naked Chicago bulb”. He slaps soap on his back like father but dries himself with an unwashed/sears Turkish towel. These are the elements of nostalgia that run throughout the poem.

like mother
I hear faint morning song
(though here it sound)
Japanese) (169)

In “Chicago Zen”, the poet expresses a similar kind of double vision. Like the other poems, this poem is also set in Chicago. It has verses in which the immediate city scene is dissolved in the poet’s mind in favour of a rich vein of images drawn from an exotic culture.

The traffic light turns orange
57th and Dorchester, and you stumble,
you fall into a vision of forest fires,
enter a frothing Himalayan rivers. (*Collected Poems*, 186)

Thus, ‘Chicago Zen’ gives expression of the kind of disorientation experienced by the immigrants in the big American city. The new environment is, it would seem, the “country [that] cannot be reached” except by religiously all its small rules, and even then, for the immigrants, there is always something that does not feel quite right. To use the image with which the poem ends, it is like descending a flight of stairs with a sense of unease, waiting “for the last/step that’s never

there". This is the frequent experience of the immigrant, never to feel entirely at home, however hard he or she tries to adjust to the alien land. It applies particularly to first-generation immigrants who make the transition, as Ramanujan did, as adults. Nothing can ever really replace the culture in which they grew up and which shaped their outlook on the world.

The diasporic atmosphere gives birth to a variety of emotions and aspirations. The poetry of Ramanujan presents all the shades of such emotions. The city of Chicago and its ambience plays a vital role in the poem 'Take Care'. The title itself suggests that the poet cautions us what to do, what not to do while living in the city of Chicago in America. The opening stanza presents the uncertain and dubious climatic condition along with the local kittens, children, enemies, friends and wives too. No one is believable and trustworthy-not even the air :

In Chicago it blow hot and cold. Trees
play fast and loose ...
Enemies have guns
Friends have doubts
Wives have lawyers. (103)

The sky-scrappers seem to be peeping through telescopes :

Smudge your windows
Draw the blinds. (103)

The insecurity of the girls is felt in and out both. At home it is suggested to "give daughters pills" probably to prevent any possible pregnancy and to "learn karate" for their protection. Even for picking up her books, a bending-up school girl may be noticed amorously and raped consequently in libraries. Thus, the city is never safe with the apprehension of a "bomb in barber's chair", "knife on the museum stair", further a very precise observation is presented throughout the poem. That when you are in Chicago: "take special care/ not to stare/ at pepper grinders/ salt shakers, or the box/ of matches on the black/ and white squares/ of your kitchen cloth".

The last section of the poem is specifically meant for outsiders giving a strict command to them :

In Chicago do not walk slow Find no time to stand
and stare Down there, blacks look black
And whites, they look blacker. (104)

These last two lines are highly sarcastic in the sense that the Blacks are naturally black so look black but the Whites because of their evil nature look blacker than Blacks.

It is 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 works 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 thereby 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 up to the age of thirty three. 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 beat. (45)

For Ramanujan, the immigrant's situation or to say expatriation proved to be a dynamic and enriching force. It somehow enabled him for a bold and reconciled acceptance of what he had in his blood and what was being infused from outside. Ramanujan has assimilated the culture 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 the poet has made a multi-cultural commitment and transcended the limitations of an expatriate poet. In *Journal of South Asian Literature* S.Dulai stated the following things about Ramanujan:

His poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay 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 circle comprehending ever-wider realities, at maintaining a perfectly taut evolving central vision and the expanding scene before it... (151).

In the poem 'Death and the Good Citizen', he refers to the traditional method of cremation used by the most orthodox Hindus :

.....they'll cremate me in Sanskrit and sandalwood,
have me sterilized to a scatter of ash (*Collected poems*, 136)

Niranjan Mohanty opines that "in "Death and the Good Citizen" Ramanujan cherishes a hope to die in his own native land, for in a culture not his own, 'his tissue will never graft', and he can never be compost for jasmine and eggplant. He prefers to be cremated in Sanskrit and sandalwood, and to be 'sterilized to scatter

of ash'. The poet's inner forms never intend to dispossess their ties with the native land". (Mohanty, 170) He had strong affinity with the Indian culture and Indian consciousness. Though he never physically left the west, yet his mind, soul and life became dedicated to India and its native culture as can be found in Dravidian language and literature. The poet declares his conviction blatantly in the following lines:

But, sorry, I cannot unlearn conventions of despair.
They have their pride. I must seek and will find
my particular hell only in my hindu mind.
(*Collected Poems*, 34)

Here, we find the poet's own confession affirming his devotion and adherence to the soil, culture and ethos of India. This is the foremost factor which joins a poet to his native traditions and sensibility in spite of whatever language he uses as a mode of expression or whichever place in the world he lives in. The last line of the poem "A Report" clearly shows his fear of being nostalgic of a blue Mysore native house in a foreign land of a Chicago.

...what can I do
but sleep,...
to dream of a blue Mysore house in Chicago?
(249)

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that though Ramanujan was staying in America, he maintained the status of equilibrium by not forgetting his own Indian culture. He successfully managed to live in two cultures simultaneously. The very essence of life is to proceed forward in all situations boldly. It means the truth of life lies neither in alienation nor in the essence of belonging, but in the balancing of these two experiences of life. Ramanujan has assimilated the culture of his native land and that 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 multicultural commitment and transcended the limitations of an expatriate poet.

Yasmeen Galaria

Research Scholar, Dept. of English
Ranchi University, Ranchi

Works Cited

- Dulai, Surjit S. "First and Only Sight: The Centre and Circles of A.K.Ramnujan's Poetry". *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 24, no-2, Summer-Fall. 1989.
- Mohanty, Niranjan. "Things as They Are: The Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan". *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 28, no-1&2, Spring-Fall. 1993.
- _____. "The Points of Return: Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan". *Millennium Perspective of A.K.Ramanujan*, ed. Surya Nath Pandey. New Delhi. Atlantic Publishers. 2001.
- Parthasarathy, R. *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. New Delhi. Oxford University Press. 1976.
- _____. "Exile". *Rough Passages*. New Delhi. Oxford University Press. 1977.
- Ramanujan, A.K. *The Collected Poems of A.K.Ramanujan*. ed. Vinay Dharwadker. New Delhi. Oxford University Press. 1995.
- Ramanujan, A.K. et.al. "Interview Two". *Uncollected Poems and Prose*. ed. Molly Daniels Ramanujan And Keith Harrison. New Delhi. Oxford University Press. 2001.