
HYBRIDITY AND TRANSCULTURAL MOTIF IN THE POETRY OF A. K. RAMANUJAN

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Abstract

Poetry is the expression of spontaneous feeling of abstract ideas and thoughts. Indian poetry in English was a weapon of freedom struggle in the past for different poets. After independence of India and other colonies, the trend of themes of poetry change as the world become more cosmopolitan and multicultural. Expatriate poets of India and other nations develop a feeling of 'hybridity' because they are either considered 'the other' in the western hegemonic world, or not accepted in their homeland. This creates 'in-between identity into them. This 'in-between' identity became a curse. They tried to release themselves from that unbroken bond. So they started hunting into the past, tried to connect themselves to the culture of their motherland to sooth the hungry appetite. In the following article I try to find out hybridity and transcultural aspects in the poetry of A. K. Ramanujan, an Indian expatriate poet.

Keywords: *freedom struggle, cosmopolitan and multicultural world, hybridity, in-between, and motherland.*

Introduction: Indian Poetry in English and A.K. Ramanujan

Indian poetry in English has long history back to the early nineteenth century. It was developed before fictions and plays introduced in English in India. Poetry of Toru Dutt(1856-1877), Henry Derozio(1809-1831), Kashiprasad Ghosh(1809-1873) and Michael Madhusudan Dutt(1827-1873) marked the beginning of the Indian Poetry in English. Toru Dutt regarded as the first undisputed Indian poet in English. Died at young age, she grew with English romanticism of the mid-nineteenth century. She published a volume of poems "A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields". Sarojini Naidu had finest ear among Indian poets for the sound of English. Her first collection "The Golden Threshold" was a landmark of Indian poetry in English. Poetry of Derozio is fluent and vaguely aspiring,

without an individual edge, and has Byronic tone, rhythm and intention. According to William Walsh "his poetry was rather the signal of a young man's intention to be a poet than the exercise of any realized power." They critically examined the foundations of their own society and culture, and formulated proposals for social and religious reform. The mid-twentieth century witnessed the emergence of new kind of poetry in English. It is Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian environment, and reflects its mores, often ironically. Poets like Ezekiel, Parthasarathy, Kolatkar, Kamala Das and Ramanujan gave new life to the Indian poetry in English. They expressed their experiences in Indian idioms, phrases and tried to be vocal about Indian culture, custom, and identity. Ezekiel stated his position honestly and without rhetoric: "India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India." Coolness, distaste, objectivity are the marks of Ezekiel's notion of Indian life which he pictured in his poetry. His famous poems are 'Night of the Scorpion', 'Entertainment', "Enterprise", 'Philosophy' etc. Kamala Das is known for her direct confessional tone of her poetry. A bilingual writer, her works in English and Malayalam include *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *My Story* (1975), an autobiography. Her poetry is characterized with frankness and openness, which was unusual in the Indian context. Poems like 'The Old Playhouse', 'The Looking-glass' and 'The Freak' expressed her need for love.

Born in Mysore and lived in United States, worked as a professor in Chicago, A K Ramanujan is essentially 'Indian in materials and sensibility'. His acute sense, distinctive and sensitive feeling are very pure, personal and cultured, capable of justifying his love for his mother country. His poetry explores human sentiments, feelings and emotions in a direct way without any gloss or sophistication. His works include *Fifteen Tamil Poems* (1965), *The Striders* (1966), *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *No Lotus in the Navel* (1969), *Relations* (1971) and *Speaking of Siva* (1972), *Samskara* (1976), a translation of U. R. Anantha Murthy's Kannada novel and *Selected Poems* (1976). His poems reflect the personality conscious of change, enjoying its vitality, and contradictions but also aware of the past, the memories which formed his inner self, memories of an unconscious namelessness which are still alive. In his poems past and present mingled through the poet's journey of life, which is a cultural adjustment between 'West' and 'East'.

Concept of Hybridity and Transculturalism

The notion of hybridity and transcultural are epitome to the postcolonial studies. Hybridity challenges the notions of identity, culture and nation, which exhibit unified notion of historical development. Generally hybridity is used for agricultural purpose, referring the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' new species. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political,

racial, etc. In literary discourse hybridity expresses a state of "in between-ness," as a person standing between two cultures. Transculturalism refers to the idea that cultures are shaped by continual interactions, by overlapping political, cultural, social relationships, and transformed through specific and individual actions. Pratt calls this a "contact zone" of social spaces where "disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination".

The term 'hybridity' emerged within postcolonial discourse as a response to static and essentialist notions of identity of race, promoted by colonial discourses and also anticolonial discourse. H Bhabha has developed the concept of 'hybridity' to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequality. For him, hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonized (the Other) within a singular universal framework, but fails to produce something familiar. He opined that hybridity is the intermediate space in-between subject-positions that are landed as the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices. So such in-between space occurs in the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation" which he terms the 'third space'. Young stated that in colonial discourse, hybridity is a term of abuse for those who are product of miscegenation and mixed-breeds. Ethnographers used the term 'transcultural' to describe how subordinated or marginal groups selected and invented from materials transmitted to them by the dominant or metropolitan culture. Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz (1978) coined this term in the 1940s to describe Afro-Cuban culture. Uruguayan critic Angel Rama incorporated the term into literary studies in the 1970s. Ortiz proposed the term to replace the paired concepts of acculturation and deculturation that described transference of culture in reductive fashion, one imagined from within the interests of the metropolis.

Ramanujan's World of Hybridity and Transculturalism

Bruce King remarks, "Indian expatriate poets do not write from the position of a distinct foreign community, such as the exiled black or West Indian novelists, but their writing reflects the perspective of someone between two cultures. They may look back on India with nostalgia, satirically celebrating their liberation or asserting their biculturalism, but they also look skeptically and wryly on their new home land as outsiders, with a feeling of something having been lost in the process of growth." Ramanujan used his experiences as an expatriate to interrogate the values of the motherland, India, and the adopted country, USA. In the process, he gives us sensitive renderings of childhood experiences and remembered events.

Identity crisis and dissimilarity between two cultures are some important motifs of Ramanujan's poetry. He spoke both good and bad of hybrid culture, which he was

acquainted. The poem "Christmas" emphasizes the dissimilarity between the oriental and occidental traditions through the tree image in the same poem. The two different cultures are brought to his mind by the juxtaposition of the two images of the bare leafless tree standing outside his window in the USA and the lively tree seen out of his window in India which is more than a mere "stiff geometrical shape". Even he questions his position in the western society. He finds himself in a big dilemma. He is not able to consider himself either Indian or American but an 'American-Indian', a hybrid human being. His identity crisis can be express in the following lines of the poem "Christmas":

"For a moment, I no Longer know
 Leaf from parrot
 Or branch from root
 nor, for that matter
 that tree
 from you or me."

The poet illustrates this oneness of life through the example of the sap in his poem 'A Hindu to his Body' when he expresses his wish to "rise in the sap of trees" and "feel the weight / of honey - hives in my branching / and the burlap weave of weaver - birds in my hair."

Ramanujan's poetry reflects his deep insight into the cultural patterns, of both east and west. The ancient wisdom of Indian gains a new relevance in the poetry of Ramanujan, amidst the conflicts in the present world. He has analysed the human situation through the combined vision of the east and west. The Indian perspective and experience towards the human problems find a prominent place in the poetry of Ramanujan. It is through appropriate images, that he has depicted the human situation, contradictions and complexities experienced by the people. His poetry is a synthesis of the best literary traditions of the Indian and the Western world. The combination of the Indian and western elements has added a new sheen to his poetry. His focus is on the several unexplored areas of human life, which are generally neglected today. His poetry concentrates on the innermost sentiments of the people, both in the Indian and western societies.

In the poem 'A River' Ramanujan juxtaposed Indian natural calamity and western invention through the frequent occurrence of flood in the river. His love for India and deep feeling for western world create an in-between state to his identity. So he developed his love for past and condemn the old poets to being lack of imagination:

"The poets sang only of the floods.

 and the way it carried off three village houses,
 one pregnant woman
 and a couple of cows
 named Gopi and Brinda, as usual."

The early poets and their successors tick off the losses as mere statistics, unheeding of the destruction, suffering and human pain left in the wake of the flood. Their aim, according to the speaker, is simply to record a sensational event to arrest the momentary attention of the people. He finds this attitude shocking and callous. "one pregnant woman expecting identical twins " and "different-coloured diapers" are something unconventional for the reader. How the narrator knows that the pregnant woman carrying twin baby in her womb and the diapers are little bit uncommon in the Indian society. These reflect Ramanujan's hybrid notion toward two different cultures.

Ramanujan lived peacefully on the intersection between two worlds – his internal and intimate world of his core identity that lied in his Indian reminiscences and memories i.e. his past, and the outer world of his domicile that chiefly account for his attitude and perspective i.e. his present. It is his inner world of Indian memories that give the poet the raw material for his poems and it is his mature rational and bold perspective of his outer world that allows him to treat them with an entirely new angle that other Indian English poets might not have the courage to bring into light. His poem "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing", for instance, presents an altogether different aspect of the sweet innocent intimacy of the cousins against the familial possibility of intimacy, that is considered an incest. This converts into a yearning for romantic experience when the cousins grow up into adolescents and are reminded of the experience – the touch of "innocence" which no more remains innocent and gives a feel of sensuousness and a desire for romance:

"she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling; and afterwards
.....

Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it."

Ramanujan spent his few decades of his later life in United States. He tried to capture his experiences and resembled them with Indian culture. He believed that one could never disconnect himself from the memories. His expatriate experiences did not in the least dissuade him from his Indian culture. But possessing a rational mind, he was able to inculcate a practical approach towards his own culture. A.K. Ramanujan also describes the worship and reverence of the animals including serpents in India, as they are considered to be the symbol and ornament of lord Shiva. Even the festival NaagPanchami is celebrated to show the dedication and reverence to them. The reminiscences of the past are crucial in deciding upon one's identity. When he was walking through museums or libraries in US, he saw snakes that take shelter in the

museums, book shelves, glass-shelves, etc. and tried to compare it to Indian snake that he had gone through in his childhood. In the poem 'Snakes' he says:

"Mother gives them milk
in saucers. She watches them suck
and bare the black-line design
etched on the brass of the saucer."

Bruce King has corroborated this poetic feeling in his own words: " The poem presents an image, a complex of feelings, distilled memories and events which are not elaborated or commented upon. But as it begins in the present 'now' of museums of book stacks which contrast with rural India and family life, the poem celebrates the liberation from the fears of the past, 'ghosts' from which Ramanujan now feels safe." He compared the intermittent hissing of the snakes to the little clouds of dust that arise one walks along a dusty road.

Ramanujan's poetry suggests an entirely novel vision for the expatriate Indian English poets that their poetry must integrate the necessary verve, augment and continuity. He is able to blend the two cultures together beautifully. He has the exceptional outlook by virtue of which he is capable of keeping in synergy two worlds, entirely different in their cultures and dogmas. His persona is a theatre decked in occidental backdrops where oriental scenes depicting familial relations in all hues are staged, and the poet himself is the audience and the critic too, watching and analyzing with a detached interest. "He is a poet who juxtaposes the duality of eastern and western sensibilities within himself and perfectly arbitrates between the two. Neither is he an Indian conformist nor a revolutionary modernist advocating westernization- he is rather an envoy who elucidates the East to the West and vice-versa with perfect composure." In the poem "Elements of Composition" Ramanujan talked about eastern and western concept of human composition. He said according to Hindu mythology human being is the composition of five elements (panchabhuta) i.e. the earth, the fire, the wind, the water and the sky, while western scientific invention said that from 'father's seed and mother's egg' new life is created:

"Composed as I am, like others,
of elements on certain well-known lists,
father's seed and mother's egg
gathering earth, air, fire, mostly water,
into a mulberry mass,"

Ramanujan was very critical about the cultures of east and west. He knows that though there is cultural transmission and transformation among the subordinated or marginal groups through material culture, there are superstitions, poverty, and lack of education in the new transcultural society. So he doesn't hesitate in criticizing certain superstitious facets of his religion. In the poem "THE HINDOO: he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either", the speaker mocked that a Hindu cannot hurt a fly or a spider; his great

grandfather continued to be a helpless dupe of and quiet witness to the infidelity of his wife. In "Obituary" he commemorates the death of a father, and makes satirical remarks on customs and rituals linked with the cremation of the deceased:

"he burned properly
at the cremation

facing east
where three rivers met
near the railway station;"

He equally satirizes the western traditions too. He talks about the western motif of modernity like the advocacy for the freedom to seek out a vent for sexual desires, the medium of entertainment through the motion pictures and the indifferent pursuit of science like the protest against nuclear tests. He confesses that he must follow the so-called modern trends of the west to save himself from being labeled as a foreigner there:

"Yes, I know all that. I should be modern.
Marry again. See strippers at the Tease.
..... Join the test-
ban, or become The Outsider."

Transculturalism is not only mean gaining cultural dominance by the marginalized from material wealth, but also the suffering of poor from such cultural gains. The poor are subjugated, exploited and subordinated by the metropolitan material culture. The wealthy people of the cities captured the society by their cultural hegemony and power of material gains. They forced poor to live in poor condition, being it health, food and shelter. Ramanujan illustrates the pathetic picture of the poor in India in his many poems. In "Elements of Composition" he feels deep grief over pitiable position of the leprous men of Madurai. The deformed postures of lepers and their troublesome movement reduce them to a skeleton, 'pillars':

"add the lepers of Madurai
male, female, married with children, lion faces, crabs for claws,
clotted on their shadows under the stone-eyed goddesses of dance, mere pillars,
moving as nothing on earth can move."

The poet is anxious about the miserable condition of the lepers and so he calls gods and goddesses as 'stone-eyed'. S SDulai expressively says: "Ramanujan observes closely and often laments poignantly the human misery resulting from material want and moral corruption in contemporary India."

Conclusion

E.N.Lall Remarks "Ramanujan's poems take their origin in a mind that is simultaneously Indian and Western -- Indian mode of experiencing an emotion and the western mode of defining it." In the world globalization western hegemony has been challenged through the transcultural. The feeling of hybridity and nostalgic apathy become an obstacle for Indian expatriate writers like Ramanujan and others. So they tried to look back their past to establish their lost identity in the cosmopolitan world and struggling to create an identity, not 'the other' nor 'in-between', but fully an Indian by heart and soul. Ramanujan has criticized many aspects of Indian culture while living in the multicultural advanced world but at the end he backs his homeland and expresses his gratitude for his motherland. He sings the praises of about his experiences in India: "my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and fieldtrips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my inner forms, images and symbols."

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