

FAMILY-TIES IN A.K. RAMANUJAN'S POETRY

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Abstract

Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan (16 March 1929 – 13 July 1993) also known as A. K. Ramanujan was an Indian poet and scholar of Indian literature who wrote in both English and Kannada language. Though the literary output of Ramanujan is less compared to other Indian Poets but his poetical talent was no less than others. In this paper I will survey the reason for Ramanujan's strong interest in the family and Family as a theme of most of his poems.

Ramanujan is one of the leading Indo-Anglican poets. Some critics even regard him as one of the big three of Indo-Anglican poets, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. Ramanujan was born in Mysore in the state of Karnataka in 1929. This Tamilian poet after having spent the first thirty years of his life in this country, settled down permanently in the city of Chicago (in the U.S.A.) and still lives there till date. Ramanujan is not just a bilingual, but a trilingual poet. He has written poems in English, Tamil and Kannada. Ramanujan has published three volumes of poetry named "The striders" (1966), "Relations" (1971) and "Second Sight" (1976). Ramanujan's poetry is largely autobiographical and reminiscent. His memories of his past, and especially of his relatives, figures in his poems most prominently. Indeed, family figures most prominently in Ramanujan's poetry. Family may be regarded as one of the leading themes of his poetry. Ramanujan has included his family and relatives in many of his poems.

The first poem blended with family and matter which naturally comes into our mind is "*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*". Here Ramanujan has talked about his thoughts and his meditations upon the house of an important family in an exaggerated way. The characters talked about are probably Ramanujan's own family members and relatives. A vein of humour also runs through the poem. There are two key-sentences in this poem one is that 'nothing that even comes into this house goes out', and the second is that 'anything that goes out will come back'. The poet has mentioned that a lame cow coming from nowhere was given shelter by the family members and was mated with a bull to make the cow pregnant, while the daughters of the family hid behind the windows with holes in them in order to be able to witness what happens. By this incident Ramanujan has talked about the secret matters of the family with lots of guts. Here we find such personas like

'son-in-laws', 'daughter', 'wives', 'servants' and others which actually comprise a big family in the "Great House". Those people most probably were Ramanujan's own relatives. Though Ramanujan has cited such persons and incidents reminiscent of his own family in a humorous way, he did not also leave the opportunity of criticizing some of his own family members in this poem.

The next poem which has family as the central theme is "*Of Mothers, Among Other things*" By the very title we can realize that Ramanujan is mainly concerned with his own mother. The poem has striking imageries with which Ramanujan has described his mother youthfulness of a woman, her maturity into a mother, and her subsequent flabbiness and her loose flesh. Thus we are made to see the mother in our imagination almost exactly as Ramanujan has depicted her. This poem has Ramanujan's most inner-most feelings for her mother. The imagery of his mother's hand resembling a wet eagle's two wrinkled and twisted feet, with one claw having seriously damaged because it had got in a garden trap is described in a most heart touching way. Probably Ramanujan's mother would have hurt a finger in a rat's trap and this was described with such powerful imagery. The imagery of his tongue liking the rugged trunk of a tree when he recalls his mother's old age, shows his feelings towards his mother.

In "*Love Poem for a wife I*", Ramanujan has talked about his married life and the reasons for the failure of his marriage, particularly the worsening of conjugal relation with his wife, whom he satirizes in this poem. The title itself is ironical because it is not actually a love-poem but the exposure of the deficiencies, faults and shortcomings of the woman he has married. He also speaks about himself in a disparaging tone, but his irony and wit are directed against his wife mainly and to some extent his wife's father. Chirantan kulshrestha in a book edited by himself, cites this poem as an example of an attempt by Ramanujan's self to seek fulfillment in relationships. The poem concludes with the problematic uncertainty which it started. The ironic twist at the end of the poem where the poem mentions of Egyptians marrying their own sisters so that the kingdom never passes to any other blood, reveals poet's jealousy and hatred for his marriage with his wife.

In the poem "*Obituary*" as the title shows, the poem 'Obituary' relates to the death of his father and is written in a tone of grief, and yet there is a satirical tone in this poem. Ramanujan has cited here that his father after death has left "debts and daughters", "a bed-wetting grandson" and "a changed mother". Here we can easily see that Ramanujan's more concerned with the pathetic situation after her father's death rather than the death of his own father. Thus here also we find an intense touch of family elements.

Now the most interesting question which can come into our mind is why has Ramanujan used so much of family elements in his poems. Inspecting into depths of this matter has revealed certain striking reasons related with Ramanujan's own personal history. Bruce King has rightly remarked that Indian poets do not write from the position of a distinct foreign community, 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 on their new homeland as outsiders, with a feeling of something having lost in the process of growth. The ability to tolerate, accommodate and absorb other cultures without losing the consciousness of being Indian, marks the expatriate poets. This is exactly in the case of Ramanujan himself. Bruce

King refers to Ramanujan's ability to live peacefully in two different worlds, to say precisely, the world of his self and memory which is 'within' him and the world of present which is 'without', and explains that the core of the essential self remains as an inner world, but this is modified by changed circumstances and decisions. A.k. Ramanujan himself endorses this view when he says, you cannot entirely live in the past, neither can you entirely live in the present, because we are not like that. We are both these things. The past never passes. Either the individual past, historical past or cultural past. It is with us, it is what gives us the richness of what you call it—the richness of understanding and the richness of expression (Jha). To express it in the words of E.N Lall, 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.

Unlike his western counter parts who are keen to escape the society which has lost its' values, Ramanujan has carried with him his cultural roots from India, in spite of diving in foreign country. Ramanujan was alive to sharp difference between the enriching culture and tradition of Indian and Western and his sense nostalgia got intensified with passing years. So naturally he wrote poems steeped with nostalgic reminiscences of his childhood along with his family members. The influence of western thoughts brought in him a kind of aloofness from some of his family members, as we find in "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House" or "Obituary". Though some would say these poems to be a product of Ramanujan's own sense of liberation steeped in nostalgia. In "Small-Scale Reflectins on a Great House" we find Ramanujan recalls the incidents in his ancestral house in a somewhat detached manner, without expressing any particular emotion about those happenings. The same type of detached emotion is prevalent in Ramanujan's expressing of his father's death in "Obituary". A very interesting thing to mark about in Ramanujan's poetry in this connection is that he has sometimes unraveled his inner recess many a times through his poetry. A very good example of this would be his poem named '*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*'. Though the subjective self of him is not present in this poetry and the speaker is a little village girl who remembers in her matured years the sensuous touch of her cousin on a swing in childhood, but it would not be very unjustified to say that the cousin could be Ramanujan himself and the feelings are of his own which can be his own experience of a taboo relation.

The poem '*Snakes*' and '*History*' also shows Ramanujan's reminiscences of fragments of his memory of his childhood. In the '*Snakes*' Ramanujan recollects the bizarre memories of his mother feeding snakes on some particular day and his fear of snakes. Though we also come to know that it was this incident which was frequent in his childhood had made him bold enough to go to jungle and not fear snakes. The poem is a mark of Ramanujan's simplicity and honesty which is a hallmark of his poems. The other poem entitled '*History*' is very interesting for the fact that though it is also another recollection of an incident from his childhood memories but it is narrated with deep a re-analysing of a past event when he is an adult. The narrator recollects about his grand-aunt's death where the family members were busy in their selfish enterprise of grabbing the belongings of the old woman rather than shedding some tears for her. Ramanujan has specially mentioned the stony look of his small aunt who was searching for something precious under the cot of grand-aunt and finally her face acquired some expression as she found what she was looking for. Here Ramanujan has showed the utter selfishness and greed of the members of his own family thereby showing the mentality of most of us who are so hard hearted that we did not even care a fig even for our kin if our own selfish end comes in between.

Ramanujan perhaps did not believe in the might of the white man's superiority and so

he goes back with renewed vigour to his near and dear ones in his own motherland, though the recollections of his are emotionalized in un-tranquil moments. It is because of his awareness of himself being a person from a colonized country where he is always concerned about maintaining his Indianness though his medium of expression is that of the colonized. Therefore we see his poetry expressing his nostalgia of his past days with his family. Sometimes this nostalgia is blended with his obsession with the familial and racial past and memory always plays a pivotal role in his poems. Ramanujan has also satirized the society. Such as in "*Love Poem for a Wife I*". Here Ramanujan, in a mockingly tone pulled the Hindus who betroth a boy and a girl before birth. This type of social criticism is, also seen in his poems like "Breaded Fish" where he shows the sordid image of society through the description of the spectacle of a half nude woman lying dead in a beach. Another critic S.Nagarajun is of the view that Ramanujan seems to believe that living in the midst of relations binds the feet of a man. To live away from relatives mean a sense of deprivation, but to live among them curbs one's freedom. To conclude I want to say what R. Parthasarathy rightly says that family is one of the central metaphors with which Ramanujan thinks.

Workcited

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