

## **A Poet with Indian Sensibilities: A Deconstructive Reading of A.K Ramanujan's Poems**

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### **Abstract**

A.K. Ramanujan is a leading poet of Indian English literature. He is well known globally for his excellent and special depiction of Indian sensibilities drawn from Indian life and culture. Three poems namely 'The Strider', 'Anxiety' and 'On the Death of Poem' have been analysed in this paper in the light of the theory of deconstruction what shows that the Indian sensibilities is not the single string of tradition, rather it has many layers of meaning depending on the local and global perspective.

**Keywords:** Indian sensibility, Deconstruction.

A.K. Ramanujan as a poet has unique ways of expressing various issues of India which leave a permanent impression upon the mind of the readers. While deconstructing his poems, the paper looks at the traces and analyzes the various contradictions which rather demolish the traditional structures instead of holding them together in a single string. Each and every word of his poems seems to be potential enough to give rise to the predicaments that a deconstructionist looks forward.

Without A.K. Ramanujan no discussion on Indian English poetry could be complete and meaningful. Though Ramanujan himself did not like the idea of putting him under discussion in the light of Indian sensibilities, who himself identified as an Indo-English poet, it remains yet, incomplete if he is studied and analyzed without it. The primary essence of his poetry is rooted deep and inseparably in the tradition of Indian sensibilities. A.K. Ramanujan, the poet and the Anthropologist inherits this tradition from his family right from his childhood days. A famous Professor of Mathematics, his father, A. Krishnaswami was known for his peculiar and deep interest in Sanskrit and Tamil literature, what influenced the child Ramanujan. From his educated mother passed down the knowledge of the Tamil and Kanada novels, while his grandmother enriched him with the Tamil tales. A well-known translator of Tamil and Kanada poems into English, Ramanujan, maintained his touch with Indian culture and life in spite of his long stay in United States of America as a Professor of linguistics from 1963 to till his death in 1993. It is wonderful that his belief and practice in Indian culture and life had been retained by him unbelievably till his death, even though he settled permanently in USA. Many of his poetic creations, what are included in his famous collection of poems like *The Striders*,

*Relations, Selected Poems, The Second Sight, The Black Hen and other Poems*, apart from his translated poems, bear the mark of Indian Sensibility presented through memoirs, past experiences, return poems, use of myths, Legends, tales, etc. as various techniques. His encyclopaedic knowledge of India and its culture and western culture is superbly exploited in his poems in order to express an extraordinary feelings of Indian Diaspora making a decent blending of both cultures.

The poem , “The Striders” gives rise to diverse and heterogeneous ideas and radical thinking .

#### The Striders

And search  
 For certain thin \_\_  
 Stemmed, bubble- eyed water bugs.  
 See them perch  
 On dry capillary legs  
 Weightless  
 On the ripple skin  
 Of a stream

Not only prophets  
 Walk in water. The bug sits  
 On a landslide of lights  
 And drowns eye-  
 Deep  
 Into its tiny strip  
 Of sky.

(A.K.Melhotra,(ed)*The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern English Poets*,(2000),New Delhi:OUP.)

“The Striders” is included in the very first collection of poems by A.K. Ramanujan, the poem “The Striders” is one of the finest poems by the poet which opens a scope for a deconstructive analysis in relation to the poets of Indian sensibilities. The striders may be a small insect. But the poet delineates it from different angles. It causes explosion of thoughts for the poet. The thoughts are having no forms. Those do not remain in the framework of binary. In the poem we find, the first stanza is all about its physical description. The poet makes it a source of ideas. It is no doubt a strange insect. But the poet makes it a point of exploration. The poem begins with the line ‘And search’, the conjunction ‘And’ refers to the multiplying ideas, some of which may be known and the rest may be unknown. ‘Search’ itself stands for an exploration, not in any particular direction, nor in any presumable form. The poet describes the water bug as ‘bubble- eyed’, there by he makes it dynamic, not static. Hence, ideas are also likes the bubbles, very much short – lived. Those come and go. The poet refers to human ideas perching on ‘Capillary legs’. The poet may be referring to the force of globalization, through the ‘ripple skin of a stream’. Again, at first reading the poem seems to be written on the line of Imagist ideals. After the excellent narration of the Waterbug in scanty language, the poems seems to gain momentum of meaning. For some critics, “Stream” is the symbol of Universal change and of time, what is a very common idea in Indian philosophy. Waterbug is a symbol of permanence. Both the symbols refer to the myth of Bishnu, what is again an Indian God. The Bishnu is a constant in a world of flux.

The second stanza also refers to Indian tradition. The poet links the ancient time to the present time. The depth and the potentiality of the insect is heightened by the poet through the reference to the ancient prophets, who with their energy, accumulated through yoga, used to walk even on water without being sunk. It creates an impression of the fact that the poet might be speaking about power of human being, ‘who sits on a landslide of light’, means he is even capable of going deep into the mystery of light or universe. It has a touch of irony at the same time . With the growth and development of science and technology , moral strength of human being has not increased . It has rather gone down . Hence ‘the strider’ is not just a strange

insect. Through it, the poet refers to the human-being, who is very powerful in every respect. Human-being has not only conquered light, but also the sky. For the poet the high sense of adventure of human being is very significant. The poet never forgets the unbelievable power of the yoga and the yogis, which is part of Indian life and tradition from the Vedic days. But in present context the same yogic power has declined.

'Strider' is the New England name for the water insect as mentioned by the poet himself in a foot note of the poem. There is another symbolic implication in it. America which in its early stage of formation as a nation was called New England stands for adventure, exploration, sense of freedom implying much more than England or any other European country. Does the poet refer to the Americas leadership, its imperialism, its exploration in each and every field of life and its unique assimilation of people from all over world? Now that America is let down by global recession along with other European countries, the poem seems to have an ironic undertone. The poet has a high sense of wonder towards the west and the poem too has an impact on the readers because he approaches the issues as an Indian. The poet underlines the fact that what is past for India is a present for the west. As Indians we usually play our 'past' card in global forum with no critique of our present endeavour. We have our past glory, heritage, golden history and cultural achievement which have not been continuing upto contemporary time. We hardly realize our present barrenness.' 'Of prophets walking on water' in ancient past is a yogic or scientific excellence, we have not carried forth the tradition to present time. We bask in our past achievements and do nothing. We have become stagnant. But the west and the United States are not so. Their progress continues and as high as the sky. It is an on going process. It simply can not be measured. Their success goes 'deep into its tiny strip of sky'. Hence the poem is not just an account of the achievement of the west but also the contemporary feature of India in each and every field against the backdrop of a large and glorious past.

It is frustration of contemporary time which lead to 'anxiety'. 'Anxiety' kills human vitality. Ramanujan tries to project anxiety in the poem 'Anxiety'.

#### Anxiety

Not branchless as the fear tree,  
It has naked roots and secret twigs  
Not geometric as the parabolas  
Of hope, it has loose ends  
With a knot at the top  
That's me.  
Not wakeful in its white snake

Glassy ways like the eloping gaiety of waters,  
it drowns, viscous and fibered as pitch.  
Flames have only lungs. Water is all eyes.  
The earth has bone for muscle.  
And the air is a flock of invisible pigeons.  
But anxiety  
Can find no metaphor to end it.

(A.K.Mehrotra,(ed) *The Oxford india Twelve Modern English Poets*,(2000)New Delhi:OUP.)  
Ramanujan puts anxiety in a process of continuity. He explains it indirectly, not directly. 'fear' is the kindred of anxiety. So he begins with it. The source of all tension is the individual : "..... it has loose ends/with a knot at the top/that's me'. He explains the issues relating to anxiety through 'water' 'flames' and 'pigeons' and ultimately he confesses: 'but anxiety / can find no metaphor to end it.' He cannot explain the things in a metaphoric way, rather in a metonymic process.

The poem refers to the complex Indian problems like growth of population, poverty, illiteracy, lack of hygienic sense and the problem of unemployment. 'Fear' is the source of all tension in the poem. Fear may be because of communal conflict, Maoism and terrorism, apparently the problems are having 'loose ends'. The problems are not related to each other.

Those may be because of the wrong policies of the government and wrong administrations also. But the buck cannot be passed to the government alone. The problems are because of the lack of individual consciousness also. That's why the poet says that the anxieties are 'with a knot at the top/that's me'.

To express what, in fact, anxiety ridden world is the poet speaks about an anxiety less earth which is as fresh and beautiful as 'gaiety of waters.'

Then again the pigeons are the symbols of peace. Just as the air brings freshness the pigeons also stand for happiness.

Ramanujan's poetic sensibility matures, with his poem 'On the death of a poem.'

Images consult

One

Another,

A conscience

Stricken

Jury,

And come

Slowly

To a sentence

(A.K.Mehrotra,(ed)*The Oxford India Twelve Modern English Poets*,(2000)New Delhi:OUP)

It not just speaks about the death of a poem, also about the smooth flow of emotion. There is the lack of emotion in life, so also there is difficulty in articulating good poems. 'Images consult/one/another' indicates the problems that the poet wants to write about do not suit the images. Hereby, he indicates that the issues or the problems are so complex that it is very difficult to get a right image. Had the problem been vary simple it would have been solved with a metaphor, not with a metonym. 'A conscience-stricken/jury' indicates human beings so much of dependence upon reason. Emotion has marginal place in contemporary society. This is the trend which spreads to India from west. 'And come/Slowly/ to a sentence' indicates the difficulty in articulating a poetic line.

A deconstructive reading of all the three poems, "the striders", 'Anxiety' and 'On the death of a poem' shows human being's exploration with a trickle of emotion. There is no experience of emotions these days. Ideas in the poems are like parallel beings. But it is the human self from which these emanate. The strength of study lies in dissemination, not in providing a frame work.

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