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**Chief Editor
Dr. V. H. Mane**

**Executive Editor
Prof. M. P. Shaikh**

www.ijmms.in

Email : ijmms14@gmail.com

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Nostalgia, the Driving Force to Find a Voice and an Identity in A. K. Ramanujan

Dr. Tushar M. Kamble

Shri Shiv Chhatrapati College, Junnar, Pune

Abstract:

Ramanujan has the definitive voice which marked a significant break in the tradition of English poetry in India. His relationship with his past is one of nostalgia and memory. His poetry expresses an Indian sensibility sharpened and conditioned by Western education. His poetry draws its sustenance from his intense awareness of his racial burden, his Hindu heritage. The important point is that he was also aware of both the strength and deficiencies of his racial ethos. At the same time, he does not fail to notice its inability to satisfy completely the modern mind. A. K. Ramanujan as a post-independent poet is trapped in the motive of responding to the colonial ideology. But on other hand, though a poet in exile, he rejects western universalism by a cultural resistance to find a voice and an identity to reclaim natives' own past.

Post-colonial literature is a term used to refer all those literatures and cultures affected by the experience of colonization. Post-colonial literature usually has the dominant theme of the meeting of the two cultures in a particular way in which an indigenous order has been usurped by alien and intrusive values. A post-colonial study refers to an abstract combination of all problems inherent in minority discourse such as African, Caribbean and Third World studies. Post-colonial criticism emerged as a distinct category only in the 1990's. It gained currency through the books of Gayatri Spivak, Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhaba and Edward Said. Edward Said's books "Orientalism" (1978) and "Culture and Imperialism" (1993) gave a fillip to the post-colonial discourse. The word 'Colonial' refers to political, economical and cultural subjugation and hegemony. This leads to cross cultural influences or encounters to which intellectuals and writers get affected. This is called a process of hybridization that refers to a mixing of the East and the West, or colonized or colonizer. This paper sheds focus on A. K. Ramanujan's respond to the colonial ideology and his rejection of western universalism through cultural resistance.

The poet A. K. Ramanujan is an important poet from the post-independent India. He has the definitive voice which marked a significant break in the tradition of English poetry in India. Ramanujan was fascinated by ideals of Hinduism and has presented the manifold facets of it. His poetry concentrates on the innermost sentiments of people, both from Indian and Western societies. His relationship with his past is one of nostalgia and memory. His poetry recounts his past experiences in relation to his family and his most community of people back in India. In short, his poetry expresses an Indian sensibility sharpened and conditioned by Western education. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to quote Professor Tharu:

No literature develops in a vacuum. Images, themes, forms, assumptions, attitudes and discursive modes are determined, and given direction to, by the socio-cultural forces that shape the world in which the writer lives, and to which he or she responds. (Tharu, 3)

Ramanujan uses English masterfully and his effort to paint an Indian milieu. The title-poem of his first volume, "The Striders" (1966), refers to water-insects that can stand motionless upon 'the ripple skin of a stream'. (Ramanujan, 86) It fittingly describes his preoccupation with the precarious moment of fixity upon an under-torrent of change, caught just long enough for a flash of understanding of experience. It also reveals his preoccupation as a poet but also professional analyst of language, as Hindu of orthodox upbringing and living in a largely rationalist Western ethos and as a 20th century man earning his bread 'in exile'. His poetry in English marks a very important strand - that of the diasporic Indian in relation to his motherland. It also shows that how an Indian poet in English derives strength from going back to his roots. The title of the first volume 'The Striders' itself is the metaphorical expression of that floating existence that the poet has to maintain in that displaced location.

The title 'Relations' (1971) refers both to kin in India and to intimate connections between moments incongruous yet illuminating from different periods of his life. According to him, with the passage of time, the individual is prone to see the law of karma in all changes around him. Ramanujan's historical sensibility is sharp and acute and it gets projected in a number of poems in his second volume of poetry 'Relations'. Throughout this volume, familiar experience is looked up with his historical consciousness. Wives, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and a host of other relations appear even in poems which are basically historical. Ramanujan's characteristic attitude to his past exhibits his peculiar relationship to it. He tends to think about the past with nostalgia that betrays his deep anchor in it. So repeatedly speaks of his family, the places and the events in India that he no longer lives in.

In the poem 'A River', Ramanujan takes up the subject of how Tamil poets old as well as new, choose to enthuse about the 'Vaikai' river in flood, but fail to be moved by anguish that follows in its wake.

The new poets still quoted
 The old poets, but no one
 Spoke in verse
 Of the pregnant woman
 Drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
 Kicking at blank walls
 Even before birth. (Zama, 173)

Here, the poet presents with irony, the similarity in the attitude of poets: ancient and modern, and bring out certain insensitivity to suffering that they show. The lines in the poem run on smoothly from one to other like the flow of a river and the language used is typically simple but suggestive. We find paradox in these lines. The poets sang of the river as a creative force giving birth to new life but paradoxically enough, the pregnant woman is drowned with twins in it.

Ramanuja's relation with his past is one of nostalgia and memory and most of his poems are nostalgic because they usually recount his past experiences in relation to his family and his lost community of people back in India. His poetry draws its sustenance from his intense awareness of his racial burden, his Hindu heritage. His motto is "I must seek and will find/ my particular hell in my Hindu mind". (Naik, 200) His poetry is the mirror of Indian tradition. It presents diverse aspects of tradition in a new garb with a typical and radical mode of expression. This introduces irony and paradox in his poetry. He quotes God Shiva, Lord Murugan and other Gods of the Shiva's family. Ramanujan tries to emphasize the importance of religious faith which is universal. In 'Mythology II' the poet's prayer is important: "Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble/ So I too may see all things double". (c.p., 226)

Ramanujan also prefers secularism which implies tolerance toward all religions. The important point is that he was also aware of both the strength and deficiencies of his racial ethos. At the same time, he does not fail to notice its inability to satisfy completely the modern mind. Although, he stayed abroad, we do not find that he is obsessed by westernization and modernization. His poem 'Snakes' is an attack on the truth of insensibility and indifference of the modern society.

The poem 'Obituary' is nostalgic about a father's life and death. It is vivid, emotional and intense poem that looks back on the life and times of a dear loved family member. The author relates that the father left behind a legacy that will live on for him.

Left debt and daughters,
A bedwetting grandson
Named by the toss
Of a coin after him" (C.p., 111)

In the poem 'The Last of the Princes', the pathos on the fall of the Moghul empire is highlighted through the depiction of the poverty and suffering of the royal family as it falls on evil days. This extreme poverty of the family is brought out by the fact that daughters of the family went to school on 'half fee'. His nostalgia or memory of the past can be described in the words of M. K. Naik "it is not emotion recollected in tranquility but recollection emotionalized in un-tranquil moments that is the driving force behind much of Ramanujan's poetry" (Naik, 201)

As far as his poetic technique is concerned, he appears to have the surest touch of all his contemporaries. He never lapses into romantic cliché. His unfailing sense of rhythm gives a fitting answer to those who hold that complete inwardness with language is possible only to a poet writing in his mother tongue. Though he writes in open forms, his verse is extremely, tightly constructed. His technical accomplishment is indisputable and his thematic strategy exactly the right one for a poet in his situation. Ramanujan has fully exploited the opportunities his material offers him. His poetry of memory gives us much that is of human interest but remains severely restricted to the social plane of experience alone. But what we cannot deny his use of English masterfully and his effort to paint an Indian milieu with a language that is not originally Indian

yields remarkable results. We do not find any influence on his poetry in spite of his long stay in abroad. His poetry bears the stamp of his individuality.

To conclude, A. K. Ramanujan as a post-independent poet is trapped in the motive of responding to the colonial ideology. But on other hand, though a poet in exile, he rejects western universalism by a cultural resistance to find a voice and an identity to reclaim natives' own past. So instead of falling prey to the colonial ideology which has devalued our past, he strives to erode that ideology by creating to some extent a pre-colonial version of our own nation.

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Sneh Apartment, Flat No. 001,
Samarth Nagar, New Sangvi, Pune- 411027.
Mobile No. 919766076143/919766751104,
Email: ijmms14@gmail.com
Website: www.ijmms.in