

(1961 census) spoken in this country will be transvalued from something of a burden into a rich reservoir. Then the linguistic diversity will not make our country appear as a 'sociolinguistic giant' or a 'linguistic madhouse'. Like the rich bio-diversity of tropical rain forests which might contain solutions to future bio-genetic problems, our linguistic diversity contains a valuable source of alternative worldviews, sense of justice and morality and ways of living in harmony with one's natural and cultural environments. Such a framework would also transform conceptualisations of national identity and integrity, which could be accomplished only through genuine processes of mutuality and reciprocity. Hopefully then, neither linguistic diversity nor national integrity would remain academic pariahs.

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A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry: A Bird's Eye-View

A.K. Ramanujan is one of the few poets who brought about a welcome change to Indian poetry in English after Independence. Critical opinion, though divided earlier, has now come around to accept him as one of the most gifted and original poets of the later half of the twentieth century. Certainly, with his new approach, admirable linguistic skills, keen power of observation and uncanny but delicate critical touch he breathed new life into Indian English poetry.

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan, born in 1929 in a family of Tamil brahmins in Mysore was able to capture the attention of the English-speaking world as early as 1966 with his first collection of poems, *The Striders. While Relations* (1971) and the *Second Sight* (1986) continue in the direction indicated in *The Striders*, the fourth and last collection, *The Black Hen*, published posthumously (1994) adds a new dimension to his poetry. Besides these, Ramanujan has to his credit original writings in Kannada and has translated into English great works of Tamil and Kannada. His translation of classical Tamil anthologies and U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* into English have won much critical acclaim.

As one reads the poems of Ramanujan one is convinced of the aptness of R. Parthasarathy's observation: 'The family for Ramanujan is one of the central metaphors with which he thinks'. Though he was

abroad for about three decades, his awareness of the Indian heritage and his Indian sensibility remained keenly alive and formed the firm staple of his poetic output. Perhaps, the objectivity, the irony, the satirical tone and the critical stance we perceive in his poems are the result of the freedom he enjoyed while living away from home. All these are clearly perceived in the fondness as well as the bitterness with which he treats the loving as well as the mercenary aspects of family life. There are poems which reminisce the affectionate anxiety and the loving care only a mother can show towards her children. The poem 'Of Mothers, Among Other Things' beautifully brings out the close intimacy between mother and child:

I smell upon this twisted
blackbone tree the silk and white
petal of my mother's youth.

A.K. Ramanujan is thoroughly modern, and keeps his voice distant from the poetry of romantic effervescence. Just as his approach to family and relations, his approach to love also is matter-of-fact and at times cynical. He is more interested in exposing the evanescent nature and futility of love than in extolling its glory and splendour. But at the same time, his poems do not display the anxiety that marks the poems of Parthasarathy. As in his poems about family relations for probing the nature of love also Ramanujan often goes back to his past and childhood memories. These memories, articulated by a western trained man fully conscious of his Indian heritage, cannot but be sceptical. This is further accentuated by his keen sense of irony and his eye for the absurd. His portraits reveal situations of lovelessness more often than those of loving relationships.

The poem 'Love Poem for a Wife 1' begins with a prosaic statement in cold words:

Really what keeps us apart at the
end of years is unshared childhood

'Routine Day Sonnet' presents an outburst of odious hatred between husband and wife:

... But I wake with a start
to hear my wife cry her heart
Out as if from a crater
in hell: she hates me, I hate her,
I'm a filthy rat and a satyr.

Ramanujan is sensitively alive to the oddities, idiosyncrasies and

contradictions in man. In portraying them he adopts an amusingly satirical tone. The poem 'Entries for a Catalogue of Fears' is a fine example:

. . . . to the old old fear
 of depths and heights,
 of father in the bedroom,
 insects, iodine
 in the eye,
 sudden knives and urchin laughter
 in the redlight alley,
 add now
 the men in line
 behind my daughter.

The poems included in *The Black Hen*, as Kritika Ramanujan remarks in the preface to *The Collected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan* 'are metaphysical and full of a frightening darkness' and they 'seem to press towards death and disintegration and even beyond to transmutation'. A few poems see birth in death and death in birth and also life-in-art and art-in-life. The poem 'The Black Hen' speaks of a creator, terrified by his own creation:

and when it's all there
 the black hen stares
 with its round red eye
 and you're afraid

His exposition of the connection between human body and nature expressed rather tentatively in *The Striders* finds a subtler and more complicated form in *The Black Hen*.

It is remarkable that though A.K. Ramanujan lived almost half of his life in the United States he is among the least alienated among all the expatriate Indian poets. Unlike Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel or Parthasarathy he was not deeply affected by expatriation. His trilingualism and life in two cultures stood him in good stead, enabling him to resist any overwhelming sense of alienation.

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