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Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 18: A K Ramanujan

Part-I

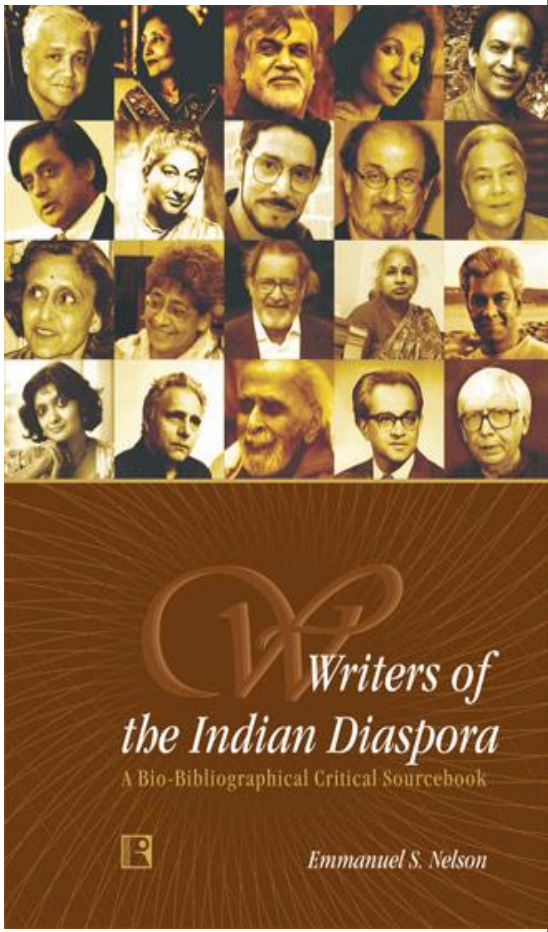
BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Diaspora

- In simple terms, diaspora may be defined as migration of people from one country to another.
- Migration is an important element of diaspora which may be either **Forced** or **Voluntary**.
- People may have diasporic experience of first generation or second generation or third generation.
- Indian Writing in English has produced many diasporic writers, like- Bharati Mukherjee V. S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai,, Jhumpa Lahiri,, Amitabh Ghosh, Rohinson Mistry.
- Among diasporic poets we have A. K. Ramanujan, Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and Vikram Seth.



Characteristic Features of Diasporic Literature

- Focus on homeland, dislocation and displacement
- Social pain of disintegration and Nostalgia
- Mobility between multiple places
- Amalgamation of cultures and identities

Contd.

- Shifting identity
- Quest of identity
- Cultural hybridism
- Dislocated individual

“the only way I could make sense of my confused world was to write.”
- Hanif Khureshi (Pakistani diasporic writer)

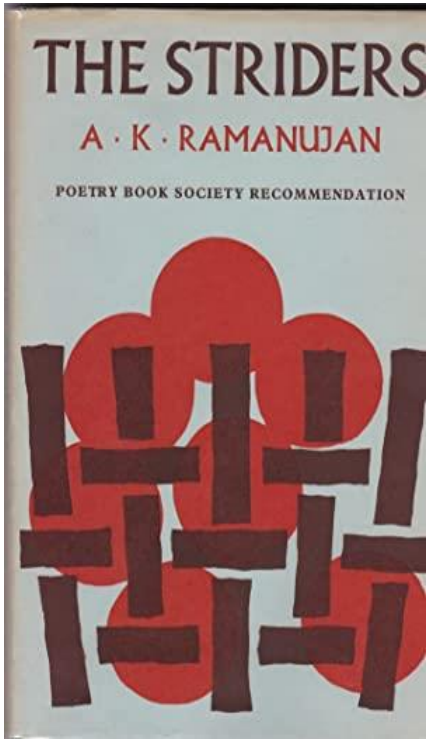
A. K. Ramanujan: Making of a Poet

- Born in 1929 in Mysore, educated at the University of Mysore and Deccan College in Pune and a PhD from Indiana University.
- Migrated to USA in 1959.
- Taught Dravidian Linguistics at the University of Chicago
- Poet, translator, linguist, folklorist, theoretician and playwright
- Founding figure of 20th century tradition (Modernist) of Indian poetry along with Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes.
- A tri-lingual poet - English, Tamil and Kannada.

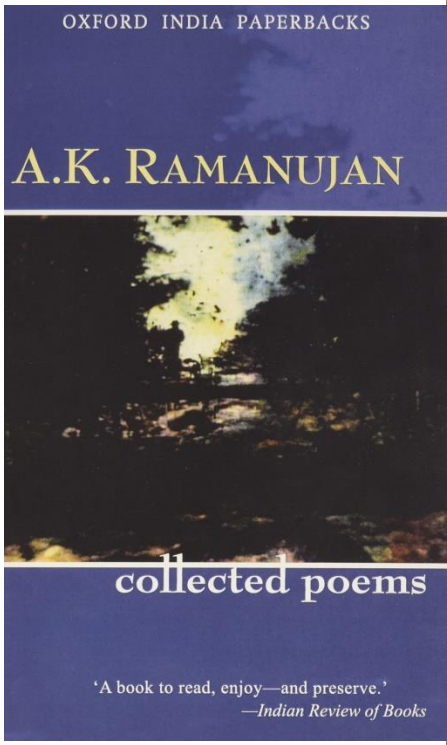
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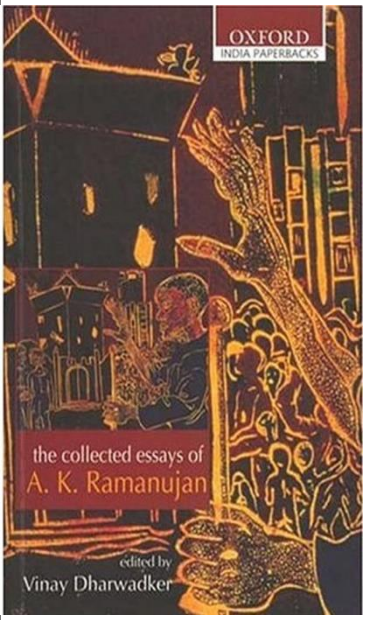
- Translated poetry of Tamil and Kannada into English (*The Interior Landscape*)
- A prominent voice of Indian diaspora
- Called himself a hyphen between Indo-American poetry
- Interested in folklore, mythology, philosophy, psychology and literary theory.
- Practiced Buddhist meditation technique to get relief from anxiety and dissatisfaction
- Honored with the title of Padma Shri (1976), MacArthur Fellowship in 1983 and Sahitya Akademi Award for English poetry posthumously in 1999.
- Died on 13 July 1993 in Chicago.

Ramanujan's Poetic Corpus



- *The Striders* (1966)
- *Relations* (1971)
- *Second Sight* (1986)
- *The Black Hen (1995)*
- *Collected Poems* (1997)





His Works (Others)

- *Speaking of Siva* (1973)
- *Folktales from India, Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages* (1991)
- *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India* (1997)
- *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation (*controversy aroused on this because of different interpretation of Ramayana at DU*)*



What makes him a distinct poet?

- Both admires and critiques Indian culture (“A River”)
- Not a blind follower of Indian culture
- Always a conflict between tradition and modernity
- Contrasts Hindu and Western world (“Christmas”)
- Memory plays a vital role in his poetry
- Admires things in togetherness, not in isolation.
- Creates visual and auditory effects through his poetry
- Theorizes Indian oral tradition and Indian folklore

Mystery of Ramanujan's Poetic Creation

I have known
that measly-looking man,
not very likeable, going to the bank
after the dentist,
catching a cold
at the turn of the street
sitting at the window of the local bus,
suddenly make
(between three crossings and the old
woman at the red light)
a poem.
Which reminds me
of the thrown-away seed
of the folktale tree
filling with child the mangy palace dog
under the window,
leaving the whole royal harem
barren. ("Which Reminds Me," *The Striders*, p. 23)

General Themes of His Poetry

- Indian tradition is the background.
- Indian myth, history, rituals, customs , beliefs and love
- Nostalgia for the homeland and nostalgic imagination (the poem- *Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day*)
- Ancestral heritage and memory
- Fear and anxiety in a new place
- Diasporic experiences
- Amalgamation of tradition and modernity

The Striders (1966)

Put away, put away this dream.
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.

Some Memorable lines from *The Striders*

A Poem of Particulars

But
every one of these
had an absurd, almost human
umbilicus
at the top
where once the Tree
had poured its
future
from forgotten roots
and possessed it close
to feed
this Fall-minded
pot-bellied
bud
till it rounded
for our baskets. (*The Striders*, p.52)

Self Portrait

I resemble every one
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows,
despite the well-known laws
of optics
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown
often signed in a corner by my father.
(*The Striders*, p. 21)

“Snakes”

No, it does not happen
when I walk through the woods.
But, walking in museums of quartz
or the aisles of bookstacks
looking at their geometry without curves
and the layers of transparency
that makes them opaque,
dwelling on the yellower vein
in the yellow amber
or touching a book that has gold
on its spine,
I think of snakes.

A basketful or ritual cobras
comes into the tame little house,
their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples.
They lick the room with their bodies, curves
uncurling, writing a sibilant alphabet of panic
on my floor. Mother gives them milk
in saucers. She watches them suck
and bare the black-line design
etched on the brass of the saucer.

The snake man wreathes their writhing
around his neck
for father's smiling
money. But I scream.
'One two three four five
five fingers to a hand'
said the blind boy counting
but he found a sixth one
waiting like a cousin for a coin;
a budlike node complete with nail,
phalanx and mole…
under the usual casual opposable thumb.
Said my granny, rolling her elephant's leg
like a log in a ruined mill:
'One two three four five…
five princes in a forest
each one different like the fingers on a hand
and we always looked to find on her paw
just one finger left of five: a real thumb,
no longer usual, casual, or opposable after her husband's knifing temper
One Sunday morning half a century ago.

Analysis of the poem

- Indigenous tradition
- Obsession
- Critical of modern outlook
- Blessing for the poor
- Cultural Consciousness

"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." - Bruce King

- " Indian tradition is not a single street or one way street but consists of many connected streets and neighbourhoods… India doesn't have one past but many pasts." (" Classics Lost and Found".)

Continuing the Tradition

Yet like grandfather
I bathe before the village crow
The dry chlorine water
My only Ganges
The naked Chicago bulb
a cousin of the Vedic sun
Slap soap on my back
Like father
And think
In proverbs. (*Collected Poems*)

Thank You