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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 19: A K Ramanujan

Part-II

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“A River”

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the water gates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun
The poets only sang of the floods.

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

Continued….

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.

He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different coloured diapers
to tell them apart.

“Obituary” (On his father’s death)

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him,

a house that leaned
slowly through our growing

years on a bent coconut
tree in the yard.
Being the burning type,
he burned properly
at the cremation

as before, easily
and at both ends,
left his eye coins
in the ashes that didn't

look one bit different,
several spinal discs, rough,
some burned to coal, for sons

to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest
said, facing east
where three rivers met
near the railway station;
no longstanding headstone
with his full name and two dates

to hold in their parentheses
everything he didn't quite
manage to do himself,
like his caesarian birth
in a brahmin ghetto
and his death by heart-
failure in the fruit market.

But someone told me
he got two lines
in an inside column
of a Madras newspaper
sold by the kilo
exactly four weeks later
to street hawkers
who sell it in turn
to the small groceries
where I buy salt,
coriander,
and jaggery
in newspaper cones
that I usually read

for fun, and lately
in the hope of finding
these obituary lines.
And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual.



Contd….

Returning home one blazing afternoon,
He looked for his mother everywhere.
She wasn’t in the kitchen, she wasn’t
In the backyard, she wasn’t anywhere.
He looked and looked, grew frantic,
Looked even under the beds, where he found
Old shoes and dustballs, but not his mother.
He ran out of the house, shouting Amma! (“ Returning”)

Characteristic Features of His Poetry

- Fusion of Indian and European literary traditions
- Blending of past and present (“A River”)
- Autobiographical notes
- Allusion to his own traditions and customs (“*Obituary*”)
- Longing for family and country continued
- Cultural hybridization in his poem
- Emphasis on sensual and particular rather than abstract
- Irony and ironic symbols, use of everyday diction
- A particular style of stanza division.

Some Lines from his poetry

- "I must seek and will find
My particular hell in my Hindu mind."
(*Conversations of Despair*)

- Mothers smear bitter neem
paste on their nipples
to ween greedy babies

and give them an inexplicable
taste for bitter gourd
late in life." (*A Taste*)

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 drowses, 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.

Relations

- Hindoo customs, rituals and myth
- Richer in mythical form and content
- Three Hindoo poems depicting truth and non-violence

Remember what the wise callous Hindus
Said when the love-god burned: keep your cool,
Make for love's sake no noble gesture.
All symbols, no limbs, a nobody all soul,
O Kama, only you can have no use
For the Kamasutra.
Ashes have no posture .

" One , Two, May be Three,
Arguments against Suicide"
Compensations
Prayer to Lord Murugan

Prayers to Lord Murugan

Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses,
Lord of solutions
teach us to dissolve
and not drown. . . .
Deliver us O presence
from proxies
and absences
from Sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings
of London and return
the future to what
it was. . . .
Lord of the last-born
give us
birth. . . .
Lord of lost travellers,
find us. Hunt us
down.
Lord of answers,
cure us at once
of prayers.

(Relations, pp. 61-62)

Plight of Women

Poems aren't even words
enough to rankle, infect
or make the smallest incisions
unless wife, girl friend or sister -
and I'm not talking of strangers
or the unborn -
somehow are
made to think it's all about
their shame in the market, or
an elegy on the death
of a far-off cousin.

("Any Cow's Horn Can Do It“, *Relations*, p. 38)

Second Sight

- ❑ Hindu Myths and Legends, Gods and Goddesses
- ❑ Images of Violence and pain
- “ No Amnesiac King”, (Tale of Dushyant and Shakuntala)
- “ A Minor Sacrifice”, (Parikshit and Janmejaya)
- “ The Difference” (King Moradhwaj and Lord Vishnu)

But today, out of the blue,
when Vishnu
came to mind, the dark one you know
who began a s a dwarf and rose in the world to measure
Heaven and Earth with his paces…

As we enter the dark,
someone says from behind,
'You are Hindoo, aren't you?
You must have second sight.
'I fumble in my nine
pockets like the night-blind
son-in-law groping
in every room for his wife,
and strike a light to regain
at once my first, and only,
sight, (Second Sight p. 89)

Sense of Alienation

had he stripped
not only hat
and blouse, shoes
and panties
and bra,
had he shed maybe
even the woman
he was wearing
or was it me
moulting, shedding
vestiges,
old investments,
rushing forever
towards a perfect
coupling
with naked nothing
in a world
without places?
(Second Sight, p. 60)

Now you know what you always knew:
the country cannot be reached
by jet. Nor by boat on jungle river,
hashish behind the Monkey-temple,
nor moonshot to the cratered Sea
of Tranquility .... (p. 84)

The Black Hen (1995)

- Interconnections among body, nature and culture
  - Krishna-Pootna mythology
  - Hiranya Kashyapu and Lord Vishnu
  - Obduracy of a young female votary of lord Vishnu

Poetry too is a tigress
Except there is no fifth man
Left on a tree
When she takes your breath.
(No Fifth Man)

When the clever man asks the perfect boon:
Not to be slain by demon, god or by
Beast, not by day nor by night,
By no manufactured weapon, not out
Of doors nor inside, not in the sky
Nor on earth, come now come soon
Vishnu, man, lion, neither and both , to hold
Him in your lap to disembowel his pride
With the steel glint of bare claws at twilight.

Critical Assessment

- “Ramanujan is neither a nostalgic traditionalist nor an advocate of modernization and westernization. He is a product of both and his poems reflect a personality conscious of change, enjoying its vitality, freedom and contradictions, but also aware of memories which form his inner self, memories of an unconscious ‘namelessness’, which are still alive, at the foundation of the self.” - Bruce King

- “Like tricky Chinese boxes, A. K. Ramanujan's poems are difficult to open but of exquisite workmanship; they're objects to hold between fingers as much as they are printed lines to read with the eyes.” - Mehrotra
- “Though Ramanujan was an expatriate academician teaching linguistics in Chicago, the Indian sensibility and experience was deeply rooted in him. He retained an unfractured Indian spirit.” - Hari Mohan Prasad

Conclusion

- ✓ Ramanujan's poetry builds bridges between the East and the West.
- ✓ His poems are deeply rooted in Indian sensibility.
- ✓ The abundant use of Indian tales, myths, mores, and epics annex him to his roots.
- ✓ His language resonates with philosophical, existential and scientific concerns.
- ✓ Critical though of certain stigmas of his culture, yet he doesn't want to 'unlearn conventions of despair'.
- ✓ Straddling albeit between two cultures, Ramanujan's muse globalizes Indian myths, cultures, beliefs, superstitions and religions.

Summing up

“Where are you? I’m home! I’m hungry!
But there was no answer, not even an echo
In the deserted street blazing with sunshine
Suddenly he remembered he was now sixty-one
And he hadn’t a mother for forty years.” (Returning)

Thank You

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