

A. K. RAMANUJAN'S POETIC ACHIEVEMENT

Dr. Suresh S. B., #1055/1, First Floor, 4th Main, 5th Cross, K.N. Extension Triveni Road, Yashwanthapura, Bengaluru- 560064, Karnataka

A.K. Ramanujan is a great poet, first and foremost. A.K. Ramanujan in his childhood days wanted to become a magician as A.K. Mehrotra recalls in his essay "Looking for A.K. Ramanujan." This explains the reason why Ramanujan grew as a magician of poetry. As he had got stitched a coat with hidden pockets, with elastic bands, top-hat and wand, he developed his poetic talents in that way. Perhaps, his position as a Professor of South Asian Literature at the Chicago University helped him to grow into a giant in the fields of art, poetry, translation and folklore. Milton Singer states,

Ramanujan would proceed to present such a diversity of texts and contexts, oral and written tales, poems, interviews, and conversations, that the answer to the question would become inescapable, not as a dogmatic assertion, but as an invitation to look at the posed question from a fresh perspective. (Singer 40)

The poet Ramanujan was an individualist. As a Tamil brahmin and American citizen he might have read Emerson's writings including "Self-Reliance." Ramanujan said, "I resemble everyone/ but myself." Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 in a Tamil brahmin family. His father was a math's professor; and the family had multilingual atmosphere. He had his education in Mysore and Poona and served in Belgaum. He did his PhD in linguistics at Indiana University, USA in 1962 and became a professor in Chicago University for the next thirty years. He died in 1993.

Ramanujan's books of poems began to appear: *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1986), and *The Black Hen* (1995). One of his poems dated 1992 reads thus. His poems appeared in *Harper Anthology of Poetry* (1981) with Anglo-American poets. His English translations of the richest specimen of poems from Tamil, Kannada and Telugu earned him a **reputation**. These books are *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *Speaking of Siva* (1973), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), *Poems of Love and War* (1985), and, with Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *When God is a Customer* (1994).

Ramanujan was to shine in folklore. He wrote on folklore, myths, legends of South India, more so. His last book *Folklore of India* (1991) is a classic of its kind. His translation of U.R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel *Samskara* (1976) is notable. Even he has written in Kannada. A.K. Mehrotra thinks, "Translation is a metaphor for him to carry across." (Mehrotra 297)

'The ideal', Ramanujan wrote in the introduction to *Hymns for the Drowning*, 'is still Dryden's, "a kind of drawing after the life"', and he says in 'On Translating a Tamil Poem' that 'The only possible translation is a "free" one':

Translations are transpositions, reenactments, interpretations. Some elements of the original cannot be transposed at all. One can often convey a sense of the original rhythm, but not the language-bound meter, one can mimic levels of diction, but not the actual sound of the original words. Textures are harder (maybe impossible) to translate than structure, linear order more difficult than syntax, lines more difficult than larger patterns. Poetry is made at all these levels and so is translation. That is why nothing less than a poem can translate another. (Ramanujan, Qt Mehrotra 297)

Ramanujan thinks translation must represent the original. He walks a tightrope between the To-language and the From-language, in a double loyalty. "So a translator is an artist on oath." (Bande 194)

Like some of his other essays, 'On Translating a Tamil Poem' ends with a parable:

A Chinese emperor ordered a tunnel to be bored through a great mountain. The engineers decided that the best and quickest way to do it would be to begin work on both sides of the mountain, after precise measurements. If the measurements are precise enough, the two tunnels will meet in the middle, making a single one. 'But what happens if they don't meet?' asked the emperor. The counselors, in their wisdom, answered, 'If they don't meet, we will have two tunnels instead of one.' (Mehrotra 300)

Though the influence of Ramanujan's example on the translation of Indian classics into English is yet to be assessed, there is little doubt about the ways in which the translations shaped his own English poems. He was, in the early 1960s, still writing some of the poems that were to appear in *The Striders*, and just as what he knew as a modernist poet reinforced his translations, what he was learning as a translator found its way into his poems. When Ramanujan says of the Tamil poems that often they 'unify their rich and diverse associations by using a single, long, marvellously managed sentence', he could well be describing his own practice. Not only are some of his poems similarly made, but the single syntax-driven sentence can take a page or more to unfold.

For someone who published only three average-sized collections of verse in his lifetime, Ramanujan's *Collected Poems* surprises by its length. It runs to almost 300 pages. For instance, the allusions that seem to proliferate in the later work are there from the beginning. They range over many disciplines literature, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, religion, folklore and from the *Taittiriya Upanishad* to L.P. Hartley. This is less an indication of his reading, than of the way his kinship-seeking mind worked, the run-on lines wiring up its different parts.

Having once found his style, Ramanujan saw no call to make changes, not even minor ones. His speech is consistently demotic, the stanzas inventive, the tone wry, bemused, clinical. By comparison, Philip Larkin looks a sentimentalist. The examples below are from *The Black Hen*. The circumstances a divorce, a medical investigation belong to a later period ('Pain' in fact was finished weeks before his death), but the droll manner goes back to *The Striders*, where it was first perfected:

April to June burned night and day like a
temple lamp kept alive by a cripple
praying for her legs
and July was at war, bombs
overhead,
napalm fires in the bone, children
almost drowned in a flash flood
of divorce papers.

('August')

Doctors X-ray the foot, front face and back, left profile and
right as if for a police file, unearth shadow fossils of
neanderthals buried in this contemporary foot; they draw
three test tubes of blood as I turn my face away, and label
my essences with a mis-spelled name . . .

('Pain')

Barring *The Black Hen*, which was put together by an eight-member committee after his death, Ramanujan's three previous collections are so arranged that each poem illuminates the one following it. As early as 'Towards Simplicity' in *The Striders*, Ramanujan had drawn the human body and the natural

world into one frame:

Corpuscle, skin, cell, and membrane,

each has its minute seasons clocked within the bones.

This is how we see how Ramanujan's great poetry, both his own and the translated one illuminates literary modernism.

Works-Cited:

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