

Myth and Folklore in A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry

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Abstract

In this world, every culture forms their own myth, legend and rituals. Same concepts have been presented by A.K Ramanujan in his poetry which makes him a distinguished Indian English Poet. Through myth, he contrasts the ideal and the actual and projects the complexities of life. He shows the barrenness of myth in this contemporary world in an ironic tone. Having a rational mind, he was able to inculcate a practical approach towards his own culture and the detached outlook of western thoughts with the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of the East. Though he had stayed for a long time in the United States, his poems strongly exhibit his warm association with the east. In spite of his western footing, A.K. Ramanujan has never ceased to be an Indian, which is both his asset and liability as a God.

S.S. Dulai states about Ramanujan who made a multicultural commitment and transcended the limitation of an expatriate poet, in the following words: "His poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experience on the one hand, and that between his sense of his own self and all experience on the other. It's substance is both Indian and Western. Starting from the centre of his sense of self and his Indian experience, his poetry executes circles comprehending ever- wider realities, yet maintaining a perfectly a taut connection between its constant, and continuously evolving central vision and the expanding scene before it... (Dulai 151)

Discussion

A.K. Ramanujan, as an expatriate, with a sense of commitment, he finds his roots in the native ethos and tradition. He has made a niche for himself by combining different stands and themes. He was greatly influenced by his own father, Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Further, in a number of poems, Ramanujan successfully fuses the forms and tropes derived from poets like William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and W.B. Yeats with the tradition of ancient Tamil and medieval Kannada poetry and mostly Adiga influenced his poetic sensibility.

Ramanujan was also interested in all forms of folktales which catch the fancy of children. He makes a difference between folktales and poems and says that poems are from a more adult world but no adult is cut off from the folktales. He has faith that folktales create a worldview, which every person seems subscribe in his fancy. He wrote his essays on an Indian Cinderella and on Indian Versions of the Oedipus story demonstrate his grasp of the immense corpus of Indian Folktales, in their diverse language. He revealed to us the beauty of folklore and myths, their versatility and taught us to look at them with honour, not with shame. "Indian Folktale traditions are the richest in the world" he said as he translated the Kannada folktales into English and brought out the elegance of the Tamil Sangam poetry to the notice of the world.

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Ramanujan's poetry is a union of the several sights, sounds and other aspects of nature, as he had perceived them and the historical, philosophical and mythical attitude with which he has responded to them. It is this synthesis of his perception of the external word with the word of his inner imaginative response which lends an unique meaning to his poems. In spite of material, scientific inventions, myths remain central to a culture. By revoking myths in his poetry, Ramanujan tries to perpetuate the link between past and present and East and West. In myths, the poet discovers the continuity of his on self, in the present. In case of Ramanujan, the myths often act as background to sharpen the edges of his irony.

The poems of A.K. Ramanujan contain the aspects the Hindu gods and goddesses in them. It is mainly due to the poet who is basically an Indian and to reflect the religious thoughts and the native customs and rites and rituals in his poetry was indispensable for him

In "Mythologies 1", Ramanujan describes the Putana myth (the demon who offered her poisoned breast to Lord Krishna to suck from, in which the demon got the new life in her death). The paradox is that by getting killed in the act of offering poisoned milk to the Lord, she got deliverance from the life of a demon. Thus he writes:

The child took her breast in his mouth and sucked it right out of her chest
Her carcass stretched from North to South
She changed, undone by grace from deadly mother to happy demon found life in death.
(Ramanujan 221)

In "Mythologies 2" Ramanujan shows how Lord Vishnu kills a person, however, clever who has got a boon not to be killed:

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. (Ramanujan 226).

Among these mythological poems entitled Mythologies 1, Mythologies 2 and Mythologies 3, the mythical tales related to the incarnations of Lord Vishnu get expression in the first two mythological poems and the third mythological poem entitled "Mythologies 3" is related to a devotee of Lord Shiva.

The echo of the holy book of Hindus entitled *Shrimadbhagavadgita* can be easily heard in the first two poems. As Lord Krishna preaches Arjun in these words:

Paritranya sadhunam
Vinasaya cha duskritam
Dharma- samsthapanarthaya
Sambhavami yuge yuge (Shrimadbhagavadgita Ch. 4, text 8)

A.K. Ramanujan's ironical attitude towards the things gets its height in "Prayers to Lord Murugan". Lord Murugan is an "Ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love. He is represented as a six- faced god with twelve hands." (Ramanujan 113)

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The excellent poetic use to which Ramanujan has put this unforgettable myth of Lord Vaman and King Mordhvaj speaks volumes of his grounding in the quintessence of Indian cultural and wisdom. 'Moulting' is a small- prose poem, the concluding paragraph of which is quite important from the viewpoint of the application of Hindu mythology by the poet. The poem "The Difference" is a poem which mentions "The Hindu soul at death" and the "tiny Taj Mahals for tourists" and brings into sharp focus the myth of Lord Vishnu who assumed the shape of "the Dark One"- i.e., the Vaman god- who appeared before King Moradhvaj as a dwarf- beggar to test the latter's world renowned generosity and charitable nature and who demanded of the being just three steps of earth. It will be appropriate to quote here the remark made by Kurup:

Ramanujan is essentially a poet, a sensitive antenna responding to the circumambient universe and the poet keeps the man alive and kicking... it is this sensitivity that keeps his self away from being too much involved with art because too much of involvement with art corrupts the perception of the artistic self. (qtd. in Ghosh)

Ramanujan's 'A Minor Sacrifice' is another poem on Hindu myth and legend which narrates the story of King Parikshit and his son Janamejaya. The myth of killing a snake by the King in order to garland a sage in a forest earned the latter's curse- "an early death by snake-bite" for the King. The King's son, Janamejaya performed a sacrifice:

A magic rite
That draws every snake from everywhere. (Ramanujan 144)

In 'Zoo Garden Revisited', "the poet invokes various gods of the Hindus to protect different kinds of animals in the zoo, in quite superstitious way. He imagines and invokes different incarnation of Lord Vishnu in different Avatars as Matsya (the fish) in order to save Manu, the progenitor of the human race from the great deluge; Kurma (the tortoise) on whose back lord discovered some valuable things lost in the deluge and whose back also served as the pivot of the Mandara Mountain during churning of the ocean by the gods and demons for the nectar and immortality; Varasha (the Boar) to lift the Earth from waters; Narsingha (with Lion's Face) who saved the world from the clutches of Hiranya Kashyap; Vaman (the Dwarf) to test the generosity of the world- renowned King Moradhvaj renounced for his charity; though God has four human avatars as Parshuram. Rama, Balaram and Buddha. The Lord is also depicted as Kalki (the White Horse) who purged the creation and destroyed the powerful crocodile with his great wheel to save the elephant in distress. The poet has used these Hindu myth's in a harmonious whole by his excellent poetic use of the quintessence of the Indian culture and wisdom."

The poem 'No Fifth Man' starts with a reinterpretation of old Sanskrit parable from Vishnu Sharma's Panchtantra. It narrates the story of Four Brahmins who knew the miraculous Sanjivni Vidhya (sixty four arts) that breathes life into the dead. The Brahmin scholars use this Vidhya to resuscitate a dead tiger that in turn devoured them all. The fifth Brahmin who was a coward but had common sense saved his life by climbing up a tree before the mantra was cast on the dead tiger. Ramanujan equates the making of a poem with the using of the Sanjivni Vidhya:

Poetry too is tigress
Except there's no fifth
Man left on a tree
When she takes your breath. (Ramanujan 245)

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In most of his poems, Ramanujan deals with the Indian social set up and family relationship, love and marriage. In this poem 'Small Scale Reflections on his Grandmother's House', On the one hand, he presents a real picture of the joint family in India, and the typical character of Indian Culture of assimilation of all odds and ends. In all these poems, the poet distances himself from the object of his reflections and deflates any grandeur attached to traditions and even death.

A.K. Ramanujan makes good use of Hindu rituals in his poetry. For example in this poem, 'Snakes' he refers to the Hindu rituals of offering milk to Snakes on the Nagpanchmi. As Snakes are considered to be the symbol and ornament of Lord Shiva, so the festival Nagpanchmi is celebrated to show the dedication and adoration to them. In 'Obituary' the poet presents the fact that the death of a commoner like his father whose dead body is burned and its ashes are thrown in the Ganga according to Hindu Mythology.

The poet reveals the beliefs and traditional rites and rituals of the people in India and thus both aspects i.e. deities and nature occur in his poems naturally. Being an Indian poet it was natural for him to introduce the traditional beliefs of his native land. These traditional beliefs have been developed by the people from the time immemorial and who have adjoined them with the natural objects because these natural objects occupy a great place in Indian myths and legends.

In Ramanujan's poetry myths are the mode of self-recovery for a diaspora poet who migrated from his own cultural and civilization to another unknown and alien culture. After migration they are caught between their native culture and the adopted one and therefore, they try their best for self-recovery with the help of myths and folklore. He has written extensively about his family, religion, culture as well as about myths and legends of this great nation. These myths and legends worked as *Akshyapatra* for a diaspora writer like A.K. Ramanujan who get strength from going back into the lap of these.

Ramanujan reminds of the cultural beliefs of the people. They do not want to perish the things which are attached with their emotions and sentiments. Here the poet shows how the people possess intense love and care for things which have their place in their rituals, rites, traditions as well as in their daily practice of life, though the things are natural objects. It has always been a general characteristic of the human beings to show intense care and affection for the things that grow up with them or have passed a long time with them and only because of this the Poet's mother prohibits the cutting the tree in the poem 'Ecology'. She gives several reasons to save the tree from the rage of his son by saying that flowers of tree are the main material to adorn the gods and goddesses.

The depiction of "Kalpavriksha" and "Chaityavriksha" in the ancient Indian scriptures indicates that tree worship is certainly an ancient practice in India. The poems have the description of natural objects such as trees, animals and rivers etc. which are related to Hindu gods and goddess in one way or the other or have been associated with the deities due to their mythical and religious significance by the people in India.

Ramanujan realised, when he started collecting the Indian tales that most of the earlier translators changed the very fabric of the tales. In his introduction to a collection of folktales he pointed out that most of the Indian tales lose their Indigenous charm when translators "bowdlerise, 'victorianise' and sentimentalise the earthy, often body, Indian tales and render them fit for middle-class English nurseries". He further lamented that in the "hands of ethnographers, the tale loses its style and spunk and acquires 'italics and brackets'. Ramanujan gave us the tales in English rendering without letting them lose their Indian ambience.

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Conclusion

Thus the present paper intends to explore these aspects of Ramanujan's poetry with a view to highlight the creative manner in which the poet represents myth as well as folklore. Ramanujan has built his artistic house on a solid foundation of concrete and mortar. In this connection, Nissim Ezekiel remarks in one of his articles, "Ramanujan has enriched the Indian English tradition of poetry and that too in a perceptible way".

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