

A River

By *A. k Ramanujan*

About the poet:

Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan popularly known as A. K. Ramanujan was born in Mysore City in the state of Karnataka on 16 March 1929. His father, Attipat Asuri Krishnaswami, an astronomer and professor of mathematics at Mysore University, was known for his interest in English, Kannada and Sanskrit languages. His mother was a homemaker. Ramanujan was grown up to be a poet, scholar, professor, a philologist, folklorist, translator, and playwright. Though he wrote widely and in a number of genres, Ramanujan's poems are remembered as enigmatic works of startling originality, sophistication and moving artistry.

Ramanujan has been immensely popular for his poetry both original and transcreational. He has prolifically translated from Tamil and Kannada into English. His translations include ***Fifteen Tamil Poems*** (1965), ***The Interior Landscape*** (1967), ***Speaking Of Suka***(1974), ***Samskara***(1976), ***Poems Of Love And War***:an anthology of translations from Tamil(1984),and ***South Indian Folk Tales***.He also wrote ***The Literature Of India: An Introduction*** (1975). ***Sriders*** (1966) and ***Relations*** (1971) are his two collections of poems which he composed directly in English.Ramanujam's Kannada poetry is included in ***No Lotus In The Novel*** (1969)

A River: A General Introduction

A.K. Ramanujan's '***A River***' is one of his finest poems, published in his magnum opus, ***The Striders*** (1965). The poem is all about a river, ***Vaigai*** which flows through the heart of Madurai city (in Tamil the word Madurai means 'sweet city'). As a matter of fact, this city is the seat of Tamil culture and learning. It is also a holy city full of temples including the famous ***Meenakshi Temple***. In the poem ***A River*** the poet paints two strikingly contrasting pictures of the river: the river in the summer season with its dryness and the river in its full flow when the floods arrive with devastating fury. The poet has compared and contrasted the attitudes of the old poets and those of the new poets to human suffering. He has come to the conclusion that both the groups of the poets are indifferent to human sorrow and suffering. Their poetry does not reflect the miseries of the human beings. They write about the beauty of the river in full flood completely ignoring the devastation and human tragedy wreaked by this beastly force. Unlike the old poets, Ramanujan takes a complete and realistic approach in his presentation of the river ***Vaigai in this particular poem***

The Text:

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 watergates
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.

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.

Summary of the poem:

Madurai is the city of temples and poets. According to the poet, the sole concern of the earlier poets was to sing of the beauty of the city, its temples and its river. In every summer the river dries up making the sand visible. As the water level of the river decreases the sand looks like ribs of human. In addition to the sand, there are straws and woman hair under the bridges with rusty bars and patches of repair all over them. There are also shining wet stones which look like sleeping crocodiles and those which are dry appear to be water- buffaloes without hair relaxing in the sun. However no poet sings of this. They only sing of rainy season that too without mentioning the sufferings of common people caused by the river in monsoon.

The poet tells that he has witnessed the river when there was a flood during monsoon. People everywhere talked about the rising level of river water and the number of cobbled steps in bathing place it had submerged. It also carried off three village houses, a pregnant woman and a couple of cows by the amusing name of Gopi and Brinda.

However, the new poets who are Ramanujan's contemporary still quote the old poets without paying attention to the present circumstances. They never talked about the pregnant woman drowned with the twins in her womb. The poet imagines that the twins were kicking to escape while their mother was drowning but they could not and ultimately drown to death with their mother. The poets never presented this heart rendering incident in their poems.

The poet refers to himself using the third person 'he'. According to the poet the river becomes poetic only once a year to satisfy the romantic and aesthetic feeling of the poets. Then in a sudden turn the poet tells that in just half an hour, the river takes away three houses, a couple of cows and a pregnant woman who was expecting twins and was also thinking of having diapers of different colours to distinguish between them. Here the poet compares and contrasts the poetry of the other poets of his age with that of his own. On one hand, all other poets are very much interested in praising the beauty of the river on the other hand; our poet makes a balance between the beauty and the sufferings inflicted on the people by it.

Some model questions and answers on this poem:

1. How does Ramanujan compare and contrast the attitudes of the old poets and those of the new poets to human suffering in his poem *A River*?

Published in his magnum opus, ***The Striders*** in 1965, A.K. Ramanujan's '***A River***' is one of his finest poems. The poem is all about a river, **Vaigai** which flows through the heart of Madurai city. In this poem, the poet graphically presents the sufferings inflicted on the people by the river during monsoon which remain ever unnoticed to the earlier poets and the new poets as well. Through this poem the poet raises the question of an artist's commitment to the society. He has compared and contrasted the mind-set of the old poets and those of the new poets to human misery. Both the poets are apathetic to human sorrow and suffering. Their poetry does not mirror the miseries of the human beings; on the other hand they are concerned with the themes that are far away from the

stark reality before them. They write about the beauty of the river in full flood completely ignoring the devastation and human tragedy wreaked by this beastly force.

In the poem *A River* the poet presents two strikingly contrasting pictures of the river: a vivid picture of the river in the summer season and the river in its full flow when the floods arrive with devastating fury. In summer, the river is almost barren and arid. As the water level of the river decreases the sand looks like ribs of human. In addition to the sand, there are straws and woman hair under the bridges with rusty bars and patches of repair all over them. There are also shining wet stones which look like sleeping crocodiles and those which are dry appear to be water- buffaloes without hair relaxing in the sun. These are all together symbolizing the decadence of Tamil culture. However no poet sings of this. They become poetic only once a year that is in the season of monsoon when the river flows in its full majesty satisfying their appetite for aestheticism. But Ramanujan presents another side of the river in the rainy season. . With a few stark images, the poet completes the picture of the river and its complexities which have been glossed over and ignored over the time. He notes the casual approach of the of the towns people. Anxiously they talk of the rising level of water and enumerate mechanically the 'precise' number of steps as the water brims over the bathing places and how "*The river carries off/ three village houses, / one pregnant woman/ and a couple of cows/ named Gopi and Brinda as usual.*"

Thus a *River* illustrates many significant features of Ramanujan's poetry, such as his adept linking of the past and the present so as to introduce the idea of continuity, his effortless depiction of the typical Indian surroundings. This is an unusual poem with many layers of meaning and is a commentary on the indifference of the old and modern poets to the ravages caused by the river in flood and the pain and suffering caused to humans. This kind of attitude makes their poetry weak and unappealing, dry and cheerless.

2. Write a note on the significance of symbols and imagery used by A. k Ramanujan in his poem a *River*.

Symbols are basically concrete objects or images used in the work of literature to convey abstract ideas. They are often used to support a literary theme in a subtle manner. Symbol is something that represents something else either by association or by resemblance. Now what strikes one most about Ramanujan's poetry is the richness of his imagery and symbols which form the very core of his poetic art. His poetry is a fabric woven from threads of concept, emotion and sense. . It is the senses, which help him observe his environment critically and objectively. . Every image, he employs, relates to a kind of sense stimulation. So, while expressing general ideas as well as inherent meaning, he constructs images with which his memory and imagination are steeped.

His poem contains some of the striking images and symbols which are very suggestive and meaningful. The river itself is a symbol of fertility and loss. It is a destroyer and preserver of life. With a few stark images, the poet completes the picture of the river and its complexities. He notes the casual approach of the of the towns people who talk of the rising level of water submerging the 'cobbled steps' in the bathing places and how "*The river carries off/ three village houses, / one pregnant woman/ and a couple of cows/ named Gopi and Brinda as usual.*" **Here the** poet is talking about the flood which is the symbol of destruction to person and property and fertility as well.

The river also acts as a tool of linking of the past and the present so as to introduce the idea of continuity. Ramanujan's depiction of the river in season of summer is very symbolic. In the summer, the river is almost dry and arid. Only a very thin stream of water flows. So the sand ribs on the bed of the river are visible. The stones that lie on the bed of the river also exposed to view. On the Sandy bed could be seen the hair and straw clogging the Watergates. The iron bars under the bridge are in need of repair. The wet stones are all like the sleeping crocodiles. The dry stones look like the shaven buffaloes. All those symbolize the utter wretchedness and degeneration of human condition in Hindu culture.

The poet says, "*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 the blank walls even before birth*" and through **these lines he satirizes and debunks the traditional romantic view of the river Vaigai in Madurai, by the ancient poets.** The image of "*pregnant woman*" implies a fine example of two generations, the present and the future. This is a poignant imagery full of pathos.

Thus, in conclusion we can say *A River* is a fine poem with suggestive and picturesque imagery which reveal A .k Ramanujan's ability as a flawless poetic craftsman.

---- Paltu Ghosh