

Critical Appreciation of the Poem *A River* by A.K. Ramanujan

Dr. P Sreenivasulu Reddy and Dr. C.V. Padmaja

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A. K. Ramanujan 1929-1993

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A.K. Ramanujan

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan, popularly known as A.K. Ramanujan, is a great Indian poet, scholar and playwright. He started his career as a lecturer in English in Belgaum and in 1962 he joined the University of Chicago as an Assistant Professor of English. He worked in many US Universities including Harvard University, University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, University of California at Berkeley, and Carleton College. He died in Chicago, on 13 July 1993 as result of adverse reaction to anesthesia during preparation for surgery. Indian Government honoured him with Padma Shri in 1976 and also the Sahitya Akademi Award posthumously in 1999.

A River

Ramanujan published two volumes of poems, *The Striders* and *The Relations*. The poem “A River” appeared in *The Striders* in 1966. The poem is about the river Vaikai which flows through the city of Madurai, a city of poets and temples, which has for long been the seat of Tamil Culture. In this poem the poet has compared and contrasted the attitude of the old poets and those of the new poets to human indifference. Ramanujan feels that both the groups of the poets are indifferent to human sorrow and suffering and their poetry does not assess the miseries of the fellow living beings.

The poets have composed many songs and poems in praise of the River Vaikai which flows through Madurai. Ramanujan says that the river had enough water to attract the poets only once in a year when it flooded during the rainy season. But, in reality, in the summer the river is almost dry. Only a small stream of water flows. In other words in every summer the river dries to a trickle. Then one can see the sand ribs on both the sides of the water. One can also see straw and women’s hair clogging the water gates.

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.....

Wet and Dry Stones and All the Objects

The patches of repair under the bridge are also clearly visible. The wet stones in the river shine like sleepy crocodiles and the dry stones resemble the shaven-buffalos lounging in the sun. It is painful for the poet (and also strange for the poet) because not too often such scenes are described by the poets in their poems. The women’s hairs clogging the water gates tell that the

flood waters carried away a few women. Thus, it caused destruction and tragedy, but it was not noticed by the poets.

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 visited the river Vaikai only in floods in rainy season. They remembered the rising of the river inch by inch from time to time in their poetry. They remembered how the stone steps of the bathing place are immersed one by one during rainy season because flood.

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.

The poets had also observed how the village houses were damaged and carried away by the floods. They also remembered how two cows named Gopi and Brindha and a pregnant woman might be carrying twins in her womb were carried away 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.

Ramanujan's View

The word 'As usual' used by Ramanujan indicates that that loss is happening every year because of the flood. The names Gopi and Brinda are the names usually given to the cows in Indian villages. It suggests the loss of animal life. The death of one pregnant woman moves us because the woman and the baby or babies she was carrying were also killed. But the poets never bothered to take a note of the destruction caused by the river's flood water. Both the old and new poets have mentioned the losses in their poems. But the way they have shown these things in their poems show that they were not much alive to or sympathetic with human suffering.

Both the poet groups did not mention the name of the woman who was carrying twins. Before their birth the pregnant woman was drowned in the flood of the river. By the time when she was carried away by the flood most probably the twins in her womb might have kicked the sides of her womb. She might have got much pain out of this. But both the new and old poets did not refer these miseries of the woman and also a lot of destruction in their poems. Thus Ramanujan has come to a conclusion that both the groups of the poets are indifferent to human sorrow and suffering.

What Ramanujan points out is applicable to most classic poems/poets in all Indian languages. The focus or the themes have been on some ideals as well as idyllic scenes, and this convention could have made the poems to focus on the themes and styles of their times. So, we may consider that Ramanujan's *The River* aims at contrasting convention-bound poetry with free-poetry in some sense.

References

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Dr. P. SrinivasuluReddy

Assistant Professor

sreenupydala@gmail.com

Dr. C. V. Padmaja

Associate Professor

padmamonu@gmail.com

Department of English

GITAM Institute of Technology

GITAM (Deemed to be University)

Visakhapatnam-530045

Andhra Pradesh

India