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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interweaving Worlds: Hindu Consciousness in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan

Dr. Kunvar Shekhar Gupta

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts, United University, Prayagraj

Dr. Mrityunjay Rao Parmar

Assistant Professor,
Department of English and Modern European Languages,
University of Allahabad

Abstract

This article explores the profound intersection of Hindu consciousness in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan, a seminal figure in modern Indian literature. Ramanujan's verse intricately weaves together themes of Hindu mythology, philosophy, and cultural ethos, reflecting his deep engagement with both classical and folk traditions. Through a close analysis of selected poems, this study examines how Ramanujan navigates complex spiritual landscapes, delving into themes of identity, belief systems, and the interplay between the sacred and the secular. It highlights Ramanujan's unique poetic voice, which resonates with diverse perspectives on Hinduism, from ritualistic practices to existential inquiries. By situating Ramanujan's poetry within the broader context of Indian literary tradition and cultural discourse, this article elucidates the poet's contribution to shaping contemporary understandings of Hindu consciousness in literature.

Keywords: Indian poetry, Mythology, Philosophy, Cultural ethos, Identity

There is profound impact of Hindu consciousness on the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. Despite his prolonged residence in the United States, Ramanujan's poetry remains deeply embedded in the traditions, philosophies, and cultural heritage of Hinduism. His work reflects a subtle interaction between his Indian heritage and Western influences, creating a distinctive blend that highlights the tensions and harmonies between these two worlds. A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is fundamentally shaped by his Hindu consciousness, which serves as a crucial link to his Indian heritage despite his extended stay in another country. This consciousness influences his

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

worldview, deeply intertwined with the ancient traditions of South India, which frame his perspectives on family, relationships, and cultural heritage. His poetry often mirrors a narrow, focused vision influenced by this Hindu consciousness, demonstrating both the strength and limitations of his experiences (Verghese 150).

While his efforts to translate South Indian traditions into English literature have met with partial success, his work is characterized by a rich tapestry of Indian myths, history, and the vibrant cultural and spiritual life of India. These themes dominate his poetry, revealing his deep-seated Hindu heritage. Even though he spent the majority of his life in Chicago, the traditions of Hinduism and its cultural values remained an indelible part of his identity. This duality created an underlying tension between his traditional Hindu upbringing and the modern Western culture he was exposed to (Ramanujan 45).

Ramanujan's poetry underscores his unbroken connection to India, despite his long residence in the U.S. His four notable Hindoo poems—"The Hindoo: He Doesn't Hurt a Fly or a Spider Either," "The Hindoo: He Reads His Gita and Is Calm at All Events," "The Hindoo: The Only Risk," and "A Hindu to His Body"—are deeply rooted in Indian themes and philosophies, particularly those found in the Bhagavad Gita.

Despite his criticism of many aspects of his Hindu heritage, Ramanujan recognized and valued its enduring virtues. He admired Hinduism's strong belief in the unity of all life, contrasting it with the Western tradition's separation of man from nature and lower life forms. This contrast is evident in his poem "Christmas" (Ramanujan 48). In "A Hindu to His Body," Ramanujan emphasizes the equal importance of the body and the soul in Hindu philosophy:

*"When you leave all else:
my garrulous face, my unkissed
alien mind, when you muffle
and put away my pulse
the rise in the sap of trees
let me go with you and feel the weight
of honey-hives in my branching
and the burlap weave of weaver-birds
in my hair."*

From the outset, "The Hindoo" conveys a sense of superiority, showcasing a Hindu who maintains strict emotional control and refuses to mingle with shameless people at a party. This stance is a bold attempt to preserve cultural purity. However, the poem reveals the fragility of this detachment when the Hindu encounters innocence corrupted by lust, leading to a profound emotional response:

*Yet when I meet on a little boy's face
The prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat
I choke, for ancient hands are at my throat. (Ramanujan 50).*

The mask of detachment crumbles, exposing the Hindu's emotional vulnerability. This imagery effectively portrays the primal malevolence within innocence, shaking the Hindu's composure. Ramanujan suggests that despite rigorous training in maintaining tranquil wisdom (sthitaprajna), one is deeply disturbed by the realization that elemental innocence can become a sacrificial victim, a concept older than the oldest religious systems.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

In the poem "Zoo Gardens Revisited," Ramanujan invokes various Hindu deities to protect the zoo animals. The last lines are particularly notable: "Lord of lion face, boar snout, and fish Eyes, killer of killer cranes, Shepard of rampant elephants, devour my lambs, devour them whole, save them in the Zoo garden ark of your belly" (Ramanujan 52).

Here, Ramanujan refers to several incarnations of Lord Vishnu. "Lord of lion face" refers to Narasimha, who saved the world from the tyrant Hiranyakashipu. "Boar snout" refers to Varaha, who rescued the earth from the demon Hiranyaksha. "Fish eyes" refers to Matsya, who saved Manu, the progenitor of humanity, from a great deluge. Additionally, Vishnu is known for rescuing Gajendra from a crocodile and is represented as Kurma, the Tortoise, who helped recover valuable items lost in the deluge and served as the pivot for Mount Mandara during the churning of the ocean. Kalki, the white horse, symbolizes the purging of creation. The phrase "Zoo garden ark of your belly" alludes to the Biblical story of Noah's Ark, where God saved pairs of all creatures from destruction due to human immorality. Thus, Ramanujan skillfully blends Eastern and Western mythology, transcending local themes for universal significance and elevating the familiar to the mythical.

Paul Verghese notes that Ramanujan's inherently Indian sensibility has been significantly refined and shaped by his Western education and interactions with Western culture. This refined sensibility is vividly expressed in Ramanujan's work (Verghese 150).

In "Convention of Despair," Ramanujan conveys sorrow as an inherited and natural pattern, deeply embedded in his ancestral lineage:

*"But, sorry, I cannot unlearn
Convention of despair
They have their pride
I must seek and will find."* (Ramanujan 45).

As a traditional Hindu, Ramanujan acknowledges the belief that sinners must endure severe tortures in hell before being granted a new life on earth. This vision of hell fills one with despair throughout life. The poet paints a horrifying picture of roasting 'eye-deep' in boiling crates of oil, encountering 'Jamdoots with lidless eyes,' and witnessing the cut-head of a beloved one split into two equal parts, frog-eyed dragons, and a future where a teenage grandchild is sexually exploited by pimps with "ideal tomorrow's crow-foot eyes." This disturbing imagery underscores the poet's fear of committing sins and facing such hellish punishments:

*"No, no, give me back my archaic despair:
It's not obsolete yet to live
in this many-lived lair
of fears, this flesh."* (Ramanujan 48).

Ramanujan's "Hindu Consciousness" is further explored in his poem "Snakes." This captivating poem draws readers in, despite their real-life fear and aversion to snakes. Inspired by D.H. Lawrence's poem "Snake," Ramanujan delves into the reasons why snakes inspire fear, antipathy, and hostility in humans. Both Judaeo-Christian and Hindu mythologies associate snakes with evil, represented by the devil or demons. In Genesis 3, the serpent incurs God's wrath for leading Eve to sin, receiving a curse:

"I will put enmity between you and the woman

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

He shall bruise your head....."(Genesis 3:15)

In Hindu mythology, Vishnu's incarnations are also known for killing demons, particularly serpent demons (Ramanujan 55).

Indian philosophy and ways of life are also reflected in poems like "Questions." This poem draws its epigraph from the Mundaka Upanishad, describing two birds sitting on the same tree—one eating the fruit, the other simply watching. The poem poses two questions:

1. What are the specific causes that determine life's mixture of happiness and pain?
2. Were the various parts of the self, especially the self-observant consciousness, already present in past incarnations of the self, and when being born into this world of mixed pleasure and pain?

By questioning the relationship between past lives and present suffering, the speaker addresses central concerns of Hinduism and Buddhism (Ramanujan 60). This exploration of existence and suffering reflects Ramanujan's deep engagement with these philosophical traditions, highlighting the profound impact of Hindu consciousness on his poetic work.

Ramanujan's poetry presents a fascinating blend of modernity and orthodoxy. He frequently reflects on his ancient heritage and recalls his childhood experiences, family behaviors, and the temperaments of his relatives.

In the poem "Zoo Gardens Revisited" the poet invokes various gods of the Hindus to protect different kinds of animals to be found in the zoo. The last lines of this prose-poem are very pertinent to quote here:

*"Lord of lion face, boar snout, and fish Eyes,
killer of killer cranes,
Shepard of rampant elephants,
devour my lambs, devour them whole,
save them in the Zoo garden ark of your belly."*

The passage recalls various manifestations of Lord Vishnu. "Lord of Lion face," known as Nrisingha, saved the world from Hiranyakashipu, the tyrannical father of Prahlada, a devout follower of Vishnu. "Boar Snout" refers to Varaha, who rescued the earth from the depths of the ocean after it was stolen by a demon. Vishnu also appeared as Matsya, symbolized by "Fish eyes," to save Manu during a great flood. Another myth recounts Vishnu rescuing Gajendra from a crocodile's jaws. Vishnu is also depicted as Kurma, the Tortoise, upon whose back valuable treasures were recovered during another flood. Kurma's back served as the pivot for Mount Mandara during the churning of the ocean by gods and demons. Additionally, Vishnu appears as Kalki, the white Horse, destined to cleanse creation. The reference to "Zoo garden ark of your belly" alludes to Noah's Ark from the Bible, symbolizing universal salvation amidst global calamity. This blend of Eastern and Western mythology transcends local narratives to embrace the universal and mythical.

In the poetry of Ramanujan we find a most interesting as well as intriguing blend of modernity and orthodoxy. Ramanujan is a poet who is, much of the time, thinking of his ancient heritage, and who constantly harks back to his past, recalling his childhood experiences and recalling also the behaviour, the temperaments and the action of his relatives.

In "Convention of Despair," Ramanujan writes, "I must seek and will find/my particular hell is my Hindu mind" (Ramanujan 54). M.K. Naik sees this statement as Ramanujan's poetic

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

motto. While Ramanujan does not accept his Hindu heritage blindly, he is acutely aware of both its strengths and weaknesses. He acknowledges the absorbing power of Hindu faith by depicting a typical joint family in "Small-scale Reflections on a Great House." Simultaneously, he critiques Hinduism's inability to fully satisfy the modern mind, which perceives primitive or elemental evil in human life. For instance, in one poem, a Hindu reads the Gita, believing he can remain calm at all times, yet his calmness falters during a crisis. Another poem exposes the cowardice of a Hindu who refuses to harm a fly or a spider, citing "gentleness" as his reason. Yet another poem portrays the degeneration of Hindu patience into heartlessness. Ramanujan also criticizes the uncritical acceptance of tradition and the neglect of the individual. He describes how ancient Tamil poets praised a river in flood, and new poets continue to quote them without acknowledging the human tragedies caused by such floods. Occasionally, Ramanujan juxtaposes the ancient Hindu ethos with the modern Hindu's situation, as seen in his poem "Christmas," where he contrasts Hindu and Western views. While Ramanujan believes that living among relatives binds one's feet, he also asserts that a Hindu's entire anatomy is influenced by ancestral heritage

Ramanujan's nuanced portrayal of his Hindu consciousness is further exemplified in his exploration of familial and cultural dynamics. His poetry often reflects the intricacies of living within a traditional Indian family, juxtaposed against the backdrop of modern Western society. This juxtaposition reveals the tension between maintaining cultural identity and adapting to a new cultural environment.

In "Small-scale Reflections on a Great House," Ramanujan captures the essence of a joint family, a central element of Indian society. The poem depicts the house as a living entity, with its own history and memories, symbolizing the continuity of tradition and the collective experience of generations. This portrayal underscores the poet's deep connection to his heritage and the enduring influence of his familial ties.

Ramanujan's critique of the uncritical acceptance of tradition is evident in his examination of the generational conflicts within a family. He highlights the challenges of reconciling traditional values with the aspirations of younger generations, who are often caught between the demands of their heritage and the opportunities presented by the modern world. This theme is poignantly explored in his poem "Obituary," where he reflects on the legacy of his father's life and the burden of expectations passed down through generations. The poem illustrates the complexity of familial relationships and the struggle to balance respect for tradition with the desire for individual autonomy.

Moreover, Ramanujan's engagement with Hindu philosophy is not limited to its religious and cultural aspects but extends to its ethical and moral dimensions. In his poem "On the Death of a Poem," he delves into the existential questions of life, death, and the purpose of art. Drawing on the Hindu concept of samsara, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, he contemplates the transient nature of existence and the enduring impact of creative expression. This exploration reflects his deep-seated belief in the interconnectedness of all life and the continuous cycle of creation and dissolution.

Ramanujan's ability to blend personal experiences with broader cultural and philosophical themes is a testament to his poetic prowess. His work is characterized by a rich interplay of imagery, symbolism, and metaphor, which serve to convey the complexities of his

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

inner world and his engagement with the external reality. Through his poetry, he offers readers a glimpse into the multifaceted nature of his identity and the ongoing dialogue between his Hindu heritage and his contemporary experiences.

In conclusion, A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is a rich tapestry woven with the threads of Hindu consciousness, Western influences, and personal introspection. His work reflects a deep engagement with the cultural and spiritual heritage of Hinduism, while also grappling with the complexities of modern life. Through his exploration of Indian myth, philosophy, and cultural values, Ramanujan invites readers to explore the profound interconnectedness of life, tradition, and identity. His poetry serves as a bridge between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, offering a unique and nuanced perspective on the enduring impact of cultural heritage on individual experience.

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