

Homing Desire in A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry

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Abstract: Ramanujan one of the leading expatriate Indian poets identified himself successfully with India and its culture, myth, folklore, religion, and tradition. Although he left India when he was just thirty years old, he could not forget his Indian heritage and sensibility which at last resulted in desire for home. His attempt to celebrate family, family relations, rituals, religion made critics and scholars to include him among Indian leading poets. In fact he ultimately found his roots through the medium of poems.

Keywords: Home; Homing Desire; Diaspora.

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929-1993), a poet of Indian origin worked and heaved his last breathe in America. In his writings, India alongside its culture, history, and religion are never missing. Family metaphor occupies central space in his poetry with which he thinks, so writes a noted Indo-Anglian poet R. Parthasarathy (Parthasarathy 95). He is well-famed poet of Indian diaspora. Diasporics migrate to a 'new world' not only physically and geographically but with their 'cultural artifacts' and native consciousness also. Diaspora studies is primly a narrative of displacement comprising feelings of homelessness, alienation, memory or remembrances, and romantic longings for eventual return caused either by voluntary displacement or involuntary. According to James Procter, "diaspora" can appear both as naming a geographical phenomenon- the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group- as well as a theoretical concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world'(McLeod 151). The latter part of the definition is more interesting and implies of course the diasporisation of the world. Leela Gandhi writes:

...postcolonialism is generally concerned with the idea of cultural dislocation.... While diaspora... is generally invoked as a theoretical device for the interrogation of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism... diasporic thought betrays its poststructuralist origins by contesting all claims to the stability of meaning and identity. In its postcolonial incarnation, such thought reviews the colonial encounter for its disruption of native/domestic space (Gandhi 131-132).

Diaspora literature more often than not involves a history of displacement, remembrances of the homeland (from where the dispersal occurred), feelings of alienation in the adopted country, and romantic desire for return (which is possibly impossible). Basically, 'diaspora' is a

minority community living in exile. Due to social exclusion, seclusion, and marginalization, diasporics retain the country they were once part of in their consciousness as a marker of distinctiveness and difference. Even empirically, the majority of diasporics world-wide constitute minority groups in their host countries and therefore remain unprivileged and embattled. If say otherwise, it primarily refers to the permanently displaced and relocated groups having or sharing common national and/or ethnic identity. In fact, diasporics made cultural scholars and theorists to revisit center-periphery relationships and identities. Even they threatened the supremacy of nation-states.

The term diaspora immediately conjures up the image of a journey. But this journey is altogether different one. Diasporic journeys are about settling down and putting roots or 'staying put' elsewhere (Brah 182). Home is central to the thinking of Avtar Brah about diaspora. Brah writes in her *Cartographies of Diaspora*, "'Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin.'"' (Brah 192). This tendency is what she calls 'homing desire'. Brah and Phoenix in an essay "Ain't I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality" write of 'diaspora space' (already introduced in *Cartographies of Diaspora*) which according to them, is a unison of 'border', 'home politics', and 'diaspora'. They write: "The intersection of these terms is understood through the concept of 'diaspora space' which covers the entanglements of genealogies of dispersal with those of 'staying put'. They further argue that "the concept of 'diaspora space' embraces the intersection of 'difference' in its variable forms, placing emphasis upon emotional and psychic dynamics as much as socio-economic, political, and cultural differences." (Brah and Phoenix 83). To say simply, by 'diaspora space' they mean the journey from the point of deterritorialisation to reterritorialisation alongside all 'emotional and psychic', social, cultural, political, and economic uniqueness. Actually 'diaspora space' is a kind of crucible wherein creolisation or hybridisation of identities happens undermining any notion of fixity based on skin, colour, birth, country, or affiliation/heritage.

James Clifford in his essay simply titled *Diasporas* (1994) is mainly concerned with 'experiences of displacement' and imagining process of home being away from original home, and with the question as to how these are addressed in diaspora discourses. The poetics of diaspora, according to him "is increasingly invoked by displaced people who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home." According to Clifford, diasporics commonly share "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship" (Clifford 305). According to him, "Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension." (Clifford 312). Rajeev S. Patke similarly opines that diasporics combine loss and gain, the elegiac and the recuperation, by depicting the self as the bearer of a legacy which belongs

neither to a past that is mourned in the memory nor to a future that is celebrated in augury, but to the acts of mind in which pastness and futurity have their being, negatively shaped by the feelings and experiences of discrimination and social exclusion, and positively through identification with world historical, cultural/political forces, such as Africa or China.

In all diasporic life, 'roots', 'routes', 'home', and 'dispersion' are placed in 'creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origin' (Brah 193, Mishra 75). Diasporic imaginary is closely connected to the idea of homing desire (Mishra 5). Vijay Mishra in his book *The Literature of The Indian Diaspora: Theorising The Diasporic Imaginary* (2007) expresses his unwillingness to call all people moving away from their land of origin as diasporic people. No doubt, around ten million people are mobile but all of them cannot be designated as diaspora. Once in 1980's *The Statesman* claimed that Indians are ubiquitous. It does not mean that all are diasporic. According to Vijay Mishra, only those are diasporic who could not even today forget the hangover (trauma) of the moment of dispersal. Although they are rich enough but they could not adjust with their hostland emotionally, and nor could return to their land of origin. Actually Vijay Mishra reserves the term 'diaspora' only for unhappier breed, whose progress and prosperity could not compensate for the pain they once suffered and continue to suffer due to social exclusion and marginalization. They still long for which is no longer existing in real terms. Other than the unhappier breed, they are immigrants, transnationals or global people. As he writes:

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. Diasporas are both celebrated (by late postmodernity) and maligned (by early modernity) (Mishra 1).

Actually Vijay Mishra is more interested in recovering the bitter experiences during the horrible, dehumanizing, and life threatening journeys across the 'black atlantic'; slaves and indentured labourers savoured, as represented and depicted in various writings of Indian diaspora. The 'diasporic imaginary' is another concept of Vijay Mishra. He defines it as "any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement." The term 'imaginary', he uses in Lacanian sense meaning a desire, wish or image that diasporas prefer to be identified with (Mishra 14).

Ramanujan's sense of identity crisis and physical absence made his

identification with home or family inevitable and inescapable. Actually his strained feelings acquire redressal outlet in his poems. Niranjan Mohanty is of the opinion that like many other diasporic writers, Ramanujan's return on mental level "decisively resolves the poet's problem of identity, sanctions a kind of security, orchestrates a kind of solace for not being altogether faceless, illustrates a type of rootedness or relatedness, weaves an experiential web which is authentic" (Mohanty 50). Ramanujan emerges as a home-haunted poet in several of his poems. "Snakes", "Of Mothers, among other things", "Love Poem for a Wife, 1", "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House", "History", "Obituary", "Death and the Good Citizen", "Extended Family", "Farewell" etc. have been selected to verify his home-haunting melody. Home, family, and family relations are intertwined in these poems. Nobody can generally do away with the reminiscences of the immediate-left-home. It is altogether impossible to wipe all traces of lost-home away.

"Snakes" is one of the earliest home-poems. Ramanujan bizarrely associates snakes with family. In the first stanza he tells how, when and where he used to be reminded and feared of snakes. But "it does not happen/ when I walk through the woods." It happens while walking through 'museums of quartz' or libraries. The snakes often take refuge in museums, book-shelves, glass-shelves, etc. The poet says that he is reminded of snakes whenever he sees books of yellow vein or yellow amber or books with golden spine, and shelves arranged in geometric lines. In the second stanza the hissing sound of the revolving snakes is compared to the little dust clouds arose while walking along a dusty road. The dust and the snakes both by their nature encircle one's feet. The hoods snakes display take after the etched black lorgnettes. It looks ridiculous or absurd all the same. Then the snakes are likened to some "terrible aunt". The aunt is proud of her tiles (silk hat). Both aunt and snakes shed their scales (layers of skin) with the warming of moon. In the third stanza, the poet recounts a real incident. One day a snake charmer brings "a basketful of ritual cobras" to the poet's home. Their bodies are wheatish in colour with ripples (rings) all over. They move on the floor "writing a sibilant alphabet of panic" here and there. Then the poet's mother 'gives milk in saucers'. As they suck the milk "the black-line design/etched on the brass of the saucer" reappears. The snake charmer then wears them on his neck to impress and attract "father's smiling/money. But I scream." In the fourth stanza, the poet tells that he has a sister who has knee-long hair. He notices her making plates in her hair and adorns with tassels (ribbons) pins. Her braids immediately remind poet of snakes and look like the scales on the body. Both glisten. He is very much frightened of her long braids and waits impatiently it to be trimmed and tied neatly. He writes:

My night full of ghosts from a sadness
in a play, my left foot listens to my right footfall,
a clockwork clicking in the silence
within my walking. (CP.5)

In the last stanza the poet narrates a story when the poet was walking through a forest suddenly he felt as if he were walking on a wet land, and there a snake writhing in pain. Its body was 'green white measured by bluish nodes' looking like 'a water-bleached lotus stalk plucked lately'. He is so terrified that he tramples it to death. Now he is confident and fearless. He says:

Now / Frogs can hop upon this sausage rope,
flies in the sun will mob the look in his eyes,
and I can walk through the woods. (CP.5)

In the poem "Of Mothers among other things" he depicts abiding relationship between him and mother. Mother is centre. The poet is reminded of his mother's glistening youthful days (silk and white petal) when she used to pamper herself with jewelleries. It is coincided with the smell of 'twisted black bone tree'. This also reminds the poet of mother's delicate motherly affection for her baby as she runs back from rain to the crying cradles'. The last three stanzas are rich in imagery. The rainfall is tacking against trees as if a tailor was sewing worn-out clothes with broken threads; but her hands are like that of 'a wet eagle's two black pink-crinkled feet', one of her fingers (talon) is crippled or disabled; her sarees look like an unfastened feather. It means that she is now weak and thin. In the last stanza the poet feels struck dumb when he sees 'her four still sensible flex fingers' inclined 'to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor'. This was the sincerity at the domestic chasms of his mother. She is still mentally agile though physically weakened.

"Love Poem for a Wife I" is based on the poet's relationship with his wife. The first seven lines bring out the poet's sense of estrangement from his wife. The reason for this, according to him is 'unshared childhood'. As a result the couple cannot know each other's likes and dislikes and temperament. Also they cannot know about their parents. The second seven lines inform that the wife and husband both recall their past a little nostalgically and look upon each other's indulgences enviously. The recognition of each other comes slowly as the third stanza tells:

of the seven crazy aunts / You begin to recognize me
as I pass from ghost to real / and back again in the albums
of family rumours, in brother, / anecdotes of how noisily
father bathed, (CP.65)

She can form some idea of his parents by looking at the family albums or by listening to his brother's anecdotes. She looks strangely at a 'sepia wedding/ picture of father in a turban' and at 'mother standing on her bare feet', wearing 'silver rings on her second toes.' She cherishes peculiar ideas about his entire career without realizing its unique charms or successes. Her father has now grown aged and lost his temper and memory. He is now so weak and careless that he doesn't even bother about her visiting, about meeting ' nice Muslim friend' at odd hours. Then is mentioned her fight with brother James about the location of the bathroom. While they quarrel over, the poet sits along with his sister-in-law in the adjoining room without making any movement. She goes on quarrelling with her brother, they drew sketches of the bathroom from memory, from newspapers to the backs of envelopes. This is all about the

ninth stanza. She suddenly becomes more assertive and wagers the family belongings and the husband's earnings over the question of what uncle in Kuwait will say about the disputed bathroom and the well and tree standing nearby. In the eleventh stanza the poet starts speculating about the rightness of the Egyptians in marrying their own sisters to 'continue the incests/ of childhood'. The poet wants to drive home the point that his wife would have found a fitter life-partner in her brother, for both of them are of the same temperament and are prone to fight for petty things. In the next stanza the poet suggests another possibility. He and his wife should have lived more happily had they been betrothed before their birth. The marriage before birth, as the well-meaning Hindus did long ago, could have cemented their relationship and would have saved the labour of horoscopists.

"Love Poem for a Wife I" is an evocation of the poet's family life. His sense of frustration caused by the marriage of an ultra-modern lady is quite evident here. He actually desires to overcome his alienation from his wife, but emotional and cultural gaps come before him. The poem "*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*" celebrates the possessiveness of the poet's ancestral 'great house' and his failure to do away with its hold. He writes:

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things come in every day
to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago among / other things lost long ago; (CP.96)

As the poet has left this 'great house' long ago, he recalls each and everything. He catalogues all those things that come from outside and stay back for good, and those things that go outside temporarily but later on return. And the third section registers those items which never stay out. The stray cows, library books, plates came from the family in vicinity, servants, phonographs, sons-in-law never go out of this 'great house'. Bales of cotton are exported to the foreign cities like Manchester but return being processed and refined 'and often with long bills attached' herewith. Letters return having been directed wrongly. Ideas go out but come back as rumors. The married-off daughters, the runaway sons and nephews engaged in some war or fight never stay away for long. This is face value of the text. But to my mind the 'great house' of the poet's ancestry symbolizes all-assimilating, all-embracing, and all-enamoring potential of India and Indian culture. The poet, of course feels handicapped before such 'great house'.

"History" is another family saga. It is occasioned on the day a day before the poet's great aunt died. In it the poet records the selfish history of family members. According to him, history underwent changes and with the progress of time selfishness gained ground in the family firmly. On the day the great-aunt died, the poet tells that his "petite little aunt" was altogether indifferent. She was "looking for something, half/ her body under the cot, / may be a rolling pin/ her little son had brought for play/ from under the richer mob/ of cooking and washing relatives." But was overly condemnable condition the day before great-aunt died. The little

dark aunt has two daughters, one dark and one fair. What happened then the poet tells:

alternatively picked their mother's body clean
before it was cold / or the eyes were shut,
of diamond ear-rings, / bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair, / the toe-rings from her wedding
the previous century, / all except the gold
in her teeth and the silver g-string
they didn't know she wore / her napkins on
to the great disgust / of the orthodox widows
who washed her body / at the end, (CP.108)

Finally the dark and stony face of the poet's aunt became eloquent. In "Death and the Good Citizen" Ramanujan expresses his desire to be cremated as per his native culture and nature amidst mantric recitations. The people of his clan "I'll cremate me in Sanskrit and sandalwood/ have me sterilised/to a scatter of ashes'. Other than my native culture, he says:

My tissue will never graft, / will never know newsprint,
never grow in a culture, / or be mould and compost
for jasmine, eggplant / and the unearthly perfection
of municipal oranges. (CP.136)

This affirms explicitly that Ramanujan is bound with India and its culture. In "Extended Family" the poet recalls fondly his parents. He bathes like his grandfather before cawing of crow with 'the dry chlorine water' which is the poet's only Ganges. He slaps soap on his back like father, but dries himself 'with an unwashed / sears turkish towel'. Like his mother, he listens to the morning songs. Like his little daughter, he feels shy, and like his little son he plays in the garden.

In the eighth section of the poem "Images" sub-titled 'Farewell', Ramanujan a little nostalgically reminiscences his mother the day he left for the US. This might have been very sad to him and his mother. He writes:

Mother's farewell had no words, / no tears, only a long look
that moved on your body / from top to toe
with the advice that you should / not forget your oil bath
every Tuesday / when you go to America (CP.259)

In "From Where" the poet again recalls his parents:

cutting across the bangles broken
on mother's hour of widowhood, things taken
for lost like Father and his unspoken dying
thought in the fruit market in '53, (CP.271)

In "Connect!" the poet accepts parental hold on him which binds him:

father whispers in my ear, black holes
and white noise, (CP.178)

The maternal hold which according to the poet cannot be severed off as he writes:

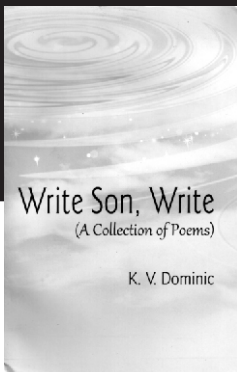
my head's soft crown bathed in mother's blood,
wearing tatters of attachments, bursting
into the cruelties / of earthly light, infected air? (CP.131)

In "A Lapse of Memory" he celebrates the stronghold of family relations:
 but recognize nothing present
 to his concave eye groping only
 for mother and absences. Nothing
 at all is family now to that estrangement:
 neither the squares of office, nor round wife,
 nor oblong home address with two
 initials and a lifelong name (CP.76)

Thus to him migration proved quite painful. It stands for him loss, alienation and estrangement finally culminating into 'homing desire'. No doubt his poems begin with his centre (self) but soon turn towards periphery (that is, his parents, native culture, art, tradition, religion, myth, and ideas). This is his 'heteroglottic' approach. In Ramanujan's case, migration has negative colours that is, loss of home, estrangement of relations alongside culture, art, tradition, religion and rituals.

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