CHAPTER III

THE CRAFT OF RAMANUJAN'S POETRY
The craft of Ramanujan's poetry

The fourth poem\textsuperscript{1} of Ramanujan's second volume of Kannada poems - Mattu Itara Padyagalu (Incidentally the poems of this collection do not have titles nor are they numbered. The purpose of the poet is, perhaps, to present a big single poem by threading shorter lyrics) seems to be typical of the kind of poetry Ramanujan has written in Kannada. The poem is a series of concrete, visual images of a tourist spot in Italy. The poet says that he once saw a palace without kings, delicately placed on the slope of a mountain between two gulfs filled with blue water. The guides here had polished brass badges as big as the old shields hanging from the wall and they knew the history of the palace by heart. The rooms of the palace had stained glass windows which silently filtered the sunlight dyeing it with several colours. The central glass-dome had pictures of Christ, Magdelene, and the yellow coloured, blue nosed and the squint eyed mule. Beneath the glass-dome was spread a blood-red carpet woven by the slaves three centuries ago, bearing a blue-white cat on it. Beyond a chandelier of crystals or cut glass there was a window-pane carrying the image of a queen and an ancient prehistoric lizard patiently waiting to swallow a fly or a mosquito which might come to rest on her nose.
This paraphrase of the poem contains all its details except its subtle rhythmic pattern suggesting the terror and mystery of the quietness that surrounds the palace. The poem is highly descriptive but the descriptiveness implies that there is nothing to narrate; it is a state beyond life, a fact that does not belong to the world and yet is in the world. The poem describes a civilization which has somehow escaped the superimposition of other civilizations in this land of wars and volcanoes. It is like Keats's Grecian urn and unlike the poem of Keats Ramanujan's poem does not try to cull out the imaginative history of the palace. The images in this poem reveal an altogether different order of reality. The dazzling images have practically nothing to tell, but what is significant is the inter-relationship of these images, a relationship which implies the never changing process of hostility between men and things. Every image that the poet presents is that of an artefact; the palace is a gem of architecture delicately balanced along the slope of a mountain; the dome of glass, the window panes, the religious paintings and the soundless music of the filtered sunlight which changes its colour every moment. But this deathless art conceals many human atrocities like the exploitation of the slaves who were forced to weave the bloodred carpet. The painted pre-historic lizard is waiting to swallow a fly or a mosquito on the nose of a painted queen. These artefacts
like the souls in Dante's hell re-enact endlessly what they
did when they were living. Even the living guides who have
grammed history are changeless in their appearance, manners
and behaviour. The stillness of the whole picture suggests
neither life nor death but it is a state which implies both

The nostalgia of the poem is for the world of aristoc-
tocracy and heroism. But along with nostalgia there is a
streak of critical awareness of the values of this kind of
world. The poem probes into the foundation of this world which
is built upon violence and cruelty. Even in art nature is not
transformed and this fact makes us sceptical about the values
of art. The very permanence of art becomes a dead weight on
the living. The poem, of course, has not made any such
statement, but the inter-relationship of the images forces us
to think this way.

It is necessary, I think, that the concept of nostal-
gia should be elaborated a little, especially in the context
of Ramanujan's poetry. It is fashionable nowadays to use the
word in its derogatory sense. But it must be noted that
nostalgia is an emotion of the civilized, an emotion through
which the past is re-structured for the sake or its meaning.
Nostalgia need not be dismissed as mere sentimentality but it
is an awareness which is very rare and helps the mind to
attain maturity. Ramanujan's poetry is full of this nostalgia. He allows the past to enter into the present and then register the tensions between the two.

There is tension between the past and the present even in this poem, although the poem does not make any explicit statement about the tension. There is only one verb in the poem and that is 'saw', a verb though grammatically in the past tense denotes present tense because the subject of the verb is a living person, his past is a part of the living present. What is really the past has no verb and therefore no continuity. It is a self-contained world which has neither antecedents nor consequences. The sunlight which pours in through the glass-dome during day-time and sets at night due to its mechanical regularity is as dead as the palace. But it is all art beautiful and terrible. The question is what is the relevance of this art to the present? He who goes to see the palace cannot help being struck with wonder at such a complete structure. But it was meant for those who lived in that palace and it fed thousands of slaves who might have built the palace, produced the artefacts and woven the blood-red carpet. But at some crucial moment in history the past having completed its course, suddenly and abruptly broke its connections with the present. The palace became a museum piece and this fact is truly tragic and ironical.
The detailed analysis of this poem reveals many facts about the poetry of Ramanujan, facts which are crucial in understanding the kind of poetry that Ramanujan has tried to create. I have already mentioned the strong element of nostalgia in the poetry of Ramanujan and the value of its expression in a poetry which is not narrative. Ramanujan has written some poems which look like narratives, in Kannada and also in English; but the narrative form of these poems acts only as a critical counterpoint of a poem which in its essence is lyrical. The poem "At Forty," in his Second Sight which narrates the sad decline of a Mysore wrestler, for example, is ironical precisely because there is tension between the form and its content. The aesthetic purpose of narration is in a way to glorify the event which is narrated and try to understand its meaning. The purpose of this poem is not to glorify the decline of Mysore jatti but to ironically portray the metaphysique of athletic strength. The weakness of the athletic strength does not deserve this form, the narrative form.

The narrative form is intrinsically nostalgic. The purpose of the narrative function - trying to recreate the past by piecing the scattered parts of the event in the order of its happening - is to seriously find out the meaning of the past event and restore its value. Put the poetry of
Ramanujan is not interested in the sentimental value of the past event. History in many of his Kannada poems functions in a way that history is not expected to function. There is a poem in Hokkulalli Hoovilla entitled 'Pitrarjita' (Heritage) which makes use of the images of the past ironically. The breaking of Somanath idol by Mohammad Ghori, the Moslem blood that flows into the veins of orthodox Hindu families, the symphonic structures of classical Indian music developed by Moslem muscians - these images build up a history of India which is a history of hopeless inter-mixture. But these images in the first half of the poem are noble and in a sense heroic. The last image, in the latter part of the poem, of an iron key which is used for inserting it between the teeth and the tongue of a patient suffering from epilepsy, is a powerfully debunking image. The grand-father used the same iron key for his safe which is now used for preventing the epileptic grandson's tongue from bleeding. The violence of historical images in Ramanujan is aesthetically important because without it the variegated pattern of history becomes incomplete. Apart from many uses of history, ironical as well as serious, what is important in Ramanujan is the fact that the poetic sensibility is strengthened by history and it gains in value. The first poem in Second Sight entitled 'Elements of Composition' has a significant passage from this point of view:
add the lepers of Madurai,  
male, female, married,  
with children,  
lion faces, crabs for claws,  
clotted on their shadows  
under the stone-eyed  
goddesses of dance, mere pillars,  
moving as nothing on earth  
can move -  
I pass through them  
as they pass through me  
taking and leaving  
affections, seeds, skeletons.

The juxtaposition of lepers of Madurai with lion-faces and crabs for claws with the dancing stone-goddesses moves the poet as nothing on earth can move. The involuntary movement of the leprous hands in an ironical way mocks the graceful but dead movements of the stone-images. But the poetry is not interested in debunking the glory of the past but tries to understand the meaning of this association which is macabre. 'I pass through them as they pass through me' and this inter-communication of the poet and the object or poetry truly enhances the significance of the poetic perception. History as it separates the past from the present also separates the dead from the living. The scene quoted above does not mean that the present is leprous and the past is graceful; it only contemplates on the problem of continuity. The lepers with
their moving hands mocking the movements of the dance continue to live but lack the awareness of the tragedy involved in such a mechanical continuation. History separates the past from the present and the very separation causes a gap in the communication of the past to the present. Ramanujan's poetry unceasingly portrays such images.

The urge to continue and the lack of continuity are the problems that worry the poetry of Ramanujan most. His poetry is abundantly filled with the images of the past the significance of which was relevant to the time. The problem with the Indian life is that it neither continues the past nor is it completely transformed, with the result that the values of life are neither dead nor living. Ramanujan's poetry is actively exploring in the area of our spiritual deadness.

We have to understand Ramanujan's poetic craft in the light of the nature of his poetic sensibility. Sometimes Ramanujan seems to write about himself, but the personal note is deceptive and sometimes misleading also. Ramanujan's poetry rejects the view that poetry derives its qualities from the personal qualities of the poet. A poem entitled "Which Reminds Me" puts the matter succinctly:
I have known
that measly looking man,
not very likeable, going to the bank
after the dentist,
catching a cold
at the turn of the street
sitting at the window of the local bus,
suddenly make
(between three crossings and the old
woman at the red light)
a poem.

Which reminds me
of the thrown away seed
of the folktale tree
filling with child the mangy palace dog
under the window,
leaving the whole royal harem
barren.

The image of the poet as a routine measly looking man
is striking and proves that there is no relation between the
measly looking man and the poem that he makes. (The poet is a
'maker' and not a 'creator'?) The latter part of the poem
presents a metaphor (precisely speaking two metaphors) which
reinforces the same idea with a slight difference, that the
poet is a creator. The 'thrown away seed of the folktale tree'
and the story of the palace dog and the royal harem are inter-
related and both together connect themselves with the image of
the poet as a measly looking man.
A poem in his *Second Sight* entitled 'On the Death of a poem although very short, sums up Ramanujan's view of poetry.

Images consult one another,

a conscience-stricken jury,

and come slowly to a sentence.

Images like the members of a conscience-stricken jury consult one another and slowly come to a sentence which is perhaps the smallest unit of a poem. Even from the point of view of linguistics - ancient linguistics of India - the meaning of a sentence is not only the cumulative meaning of words in a particular sentence but it is something more. A word is only a sign but a sentence is not merely a collection of word-signs, but it is the result of a creative effort which uses the signs to produce a structure or a complex of meaning. A poem is also a sentence, a sentence which is more creative than the ordinary sentence, nevertheless a sentence. The poem quoted above insists on this fact about poetry. In this particular instance words do not form the sentence, but the images are involved. 'Images ..... slowly come to a sentence'. The use
of the ordinary verb 'come' is highly ambiguous. It is not clear whether the images come to a sentence already formed or they come to formulate a sentence. It is possible to interpret that the 'words' in a poem do not behave like signs but they are images. The difference between signs and images is quite obvious. Signs are general and inert while images are lively because they are nourished by life-experience.

But the images in this poem are like the members of a conscience-stricken jury. Images are products of human consciousness, a fact which is easy to understand. The history of human consciousness takes a sudden turn when we come to conscience. Conscience is a Christian concept which perhaps is a legacy of Judaism. It is a moral awareness which differentiates the right from the wrong, an awareness which is deeply rooted in the generally accepted ethics of a society. Conscience is an individualistic awareness but it is a part of the collective unconscious, which like language is meant for collective experience and communication. Again, conscience being emotive becomes a complex awareness. Precisely speaking it is conscience which defines the sense of sin which, perhaps, is the most complex of all our senses.

But what exactly is the sense of sin that worries the conscience of these images? The images which the poet uses belong to the personal unconscious of the poet and the
unconscious when it is realised by the consciousness, always, as a rule, brings a sense of guilt along with it. It is like the phenomenon of an adolescent realising the dormant sexuality, which is common to all beings, in his personal capacity. The process of individuation inevitably brings a sense of sin. The process of experience being transformed into an image is similar to the process of individuation. The difficulty in understanding this situation will be cleared, I believe, if we compare the situation with the concept of the Christian original sin. Man was alienated from the God given paradise because he committed sin and it is also true that the human growth was possible through this sin. The same phenomenon is being enacted infinitely by every individual who grows through his alienation from his parents and from his community. The same rule applies to the use of images because each image is a product of our past experience and they are used in order to understand life. That which is dead is not allowed to die, but is made to live on some other plane or reality.

What is important to note here is the fact that the poetic images have not only consciousness but also conscience. These conscience-stricken images reveal the history of our communal consciousness. The images used by the poetry of Ramanujan have this quality and a thorough study of these images helps to reconstruct the history of the poet's personal consciousness as well as the national consciousness.
The conscience-stricken images coming slowly to a sentence is another strange phenomenon. Perhaps the process, although slow, seems inevitable. A sentence, as we have already seen, is a creative effort, and the meaning which is produced by this effort is valuable. A sentence is also a pattern, semantic as well as tonal, and the value of the pattern is also beneficial. But the poem has a subtle play on the word 'sentence'. A sentence means not only a 'statement' but also a 'verdict'. This secondary meaning when connected with 'the members of jury' reveals another layer of meaning. It becomes more significant with reference to the title of the poem - 'On the Death of a Poem'.

What does the title mean? The titles of the poems by Ramanujan are a part of his poetry. The meaning, it seems, of 'death' here may indicate the final expression of a poem. The process of poetry begins much earlier and expression is its final stage.

This may be one of the interpretations of the poem and one is not sure, another interpretation may be contradictory to this. But what is important here is that the poem reveals two basic qualities about Ramanujan's poetry. The first feature of Ramanujan's poetry is the importance of the images in his poetry. The imagery does its best to keep the poetry free from making value-judgements. This is true of his Kannada
poetry also and has been a source of annoyance to critics who are used to a kind of poetry which says either 'yes' or 'no' to the world of experience. Life-experience for Ramanujan's poetry is simply raw-material out of which the poetry grows.

The second important feature of Ramanujan's poetry is its lack of showmanship. Ramanujan's poetry never screams nor does it shout, but it talks in a normal way. The very normality of his poetic speech may sometimes pose a problem for communication. Kannada poetry has yet to learn the urbanity and sophistication of Ramanujan's poetry. The image of a conscience-stricken jury is completely new and alien to the context of Indian poetry. The imagery even in modern Indian poetry is as flamboyant as the tail of a peacock displaying its multicoloured eyes.
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