

## Introduction to the Indian English Poet: A. K. Ramanujan

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A K Ramanujan was born in Mysore, India, in 1929. He went to U. S. A. in 1959, where he remained until his death in Chicago on July 13, 1993. Ramanujan was not only a transnational figure, but also a trans-disciplinary scholar, working as poet, translator, linguist, and folk-lorist. Though, his medium for creative writing was English. He was fluent in Kannada, the common public language, and Tamil, the language of his family.

A.K. Ramanujan's theoretical and aesthetic contributions span several disciplines. In his cultural essays such as "Is there an Indian way of thinking?" he explains cultural ideologies and behavioral manifestations there of in terms of an Indian psychology, he calls 'context-sensitive thinking'. In his opinion, the answer to the question is 'yes', when an Indian person thinks on any issue, his way of thinking is typically Indian, loaded with Indian contexts and deeply rooted in the Indian culture. In contrast to this term, he has 'context-free' thinking. These terms, he takes from Linguistics, in which they refer to different kinds of grammatical rules. In applying them to cultures or ways of thinking, Ramanujan relies on a text-based analysis primarily.

He attributes the context-free thinking to Euro-American culture, gives rise to universal testaments of law as in European philosophical tradition. Context-sensitivity also occurs in his writing about Indian Folklore and mythological poetry. In his essay, 'Where Mirrors are Windows' (1989), he has discussed the 'inter textual' nature of Indian literature, written and oral. His ideas about Indian socio-linguistics, can be found in his essay written with W. Bright in 1964, "Sociolinguistic Variations and Language Change." As a scholar and translator of works in the south Indian Languages, Kannada and Tamil. Ramanujan worked to make non-sanskritic Indian Literature acknowledged in the realm of South Asian Studies.

In 1962, he became Assistant Professor at the Indiana University, and completed his Ph. D. in 1963. There, he was affiliated throughout his rest of

the career. He taught simultaneously in several universities in U. S., still he was instrumental in shaping the South Asian Studies Program. He worked in the departments of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, Linguistics and with the Committee on Social Thought. In 1976, the Govt. of India awarded him the honorific title “Padma Sri” and in 1983. he was awarded the MacArthur Prize Fellowship.

In “No Amnesiac King” from “Second Sight”, he refers to the legend of Dushyanta and Shakuntala and the signet ring in the belly of the fish recovering his lost memory and compared himself with him in American fish-market waiting for his wife thinking if any pomfret may contain the signet ring connecting him to the past. The poem ‘fear’ is remarkable for the clear cultural differences of fear. His American wife takes the word ‘fear’ for terror in Hiroshima while his Hindu mind has fear about the knock on the backdoor at midnight. For her, it is a routine matter while he thinks it to be a sin.

As mentioned earlier, Ramanujan wrote poetry almost entirely in English. Bruce King has called him along with two other poets, “Indo-Anglican harbingers of literary modernism.” Characteristics of his modernist style include an almost jarring realism and hints at a kind of confessional style, in his five collections of poetry namely ‘Striders’, ‘Relations’, ‘Second sight’, ‘selected poems’ and ‘The Black Hen’ in collected poems’. Some of his poems are cited here which contain the transcultural /multicultural implications in them. As Ramanujan has himself discussed the poem ‘Astronomer’ from second sight (1986). The theme of hybridity is also highlighted along with the transculturation, He says that the poem is about his father, Srinivas Ramanujan, a famous mathematician as well as an expert astrologer, Recollecting the past, he says that he had two kinds of visitors: American and English Mathematicians who called on him when they were on a visit to India and local astrologers and pundits who were splendid gold embroidered shawls dowered by the maharaja. I had just been converted by Russel to the “Scientific Attitude.” I was troubled by his holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology.” The other poem , “Chicago Zen”, from the same collection, exemplifies the theme of trans nationalism, and might be an attempt to imagine himself as another hybrid image, combination of Indian and American Cultures. Another poem, “Some Indian User of History on a Rainy Day” from “Relations”, keeps on shifting scene from

Madras to Egypt and to Berlin almost in a cinematic fashion, in which he satirizes the visiting professor of Sanskrit who,

“Suddenly comes home  
in English, gesture, and Sanskrit,  
assimilating  
the swastika  
on the neighbor’s arm  
in that roaring bus from a grey  
nowhere to a green”.

In his poems, the references to Indian, American cultures, Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Christian cultures are clearly seen. He looks at American events from Indian/ Hindu point of view and at Indian issues and rituals and customs from American/ Christian point of view. Many times, he puts his relations, Indian family system in American contexts and questions himself about his own identify. His ‘Hindoo’ poems are examples of such questioning.