

Chapter One

A.K.RAMANUJAN

AND

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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1.1. A.K. RAMANUJAN: LIFE AND WORKS

1.1.1. LIFE :

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Attippat Krishnaswami Ramanujan, a trilingual writer, was born in Mysore in 1929. He had equal mastery over English, Tamil and Kannada. He preferred English for his creative writings, i.e. poetry, and Kannada and Tamil were the mediums of his translations. He was born in a traditional Tamil Brahmin family and his father was a famous professor of Mathematics. He used the background of the tight-knitness of Indian family life with its security of closeness and bonds from which he was thankfully liberated.

Ramanujan received his early education at D. Bhanumai's Highschool, whence he proceeded to Maharaja College, Mysore. He was the fellow at Deccan College, Poona, during 1958-59. He was awarded the Fulbright Fellowship and he went to Indiana University where he studied for two years (1960-62). Then he worked as a lecturer in English for eight years at Quilon, Belgaum and Baroda. And after that he lived in the United States of America, working there as a professor of Linguistics and Dravidian Studies in the famed University of Chicago. Although he lived far away from the motherland, he never

forsook his Indian heritage and sensibility.

1.1.2. WORKS :

Ramanujan preferred English for his creative writing, poetry. In the reply to the questionnaire, supplied by P. Lal for a Miscellany in the form of symposium, he answered the question, "What are the circumstances that led to your using the English language for the purpose of writing poetry?"¹ as follows: "If you ask me why I write in English, I have only complicated answers which are not worth putting down. I just happen to write in English, it is for others to say whether it is any good or not."² But elsewhere, he has more to say about his choice of English. For the depiction of what he terms as 'my substance': "English and my discipline (linguistics, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience; and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and fieldtrips, my personal and professional preoccupation with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my inner forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where."³

R. Parthsarathy praises Ramanujan's skillful use of English: "English being a foreign language, the words are not burdened with irrelevant associations for the poet. They are invariably ordinary and inconspicuous; rarely, if ever, reverberant. And herein lies their strength. There is something clinical about Ramanujan's use of the language. It has a cold, glass-like quality. It is an

attempt to turn language into an artifact."⁴

The themes of his poems showed his deep roots in Indian myths and history. He used the metaphor of family relations to search for his self-identity, to bring out his alienation and to point out the differences between two cultures of India and the U.S.A. A.N. Dwivedi rightly remarks: "Indian myths and History, her people and customs, her rich cultural and spiritual heritage -- these form the dominant theme of his poetry. Even a cursory glance at it convinces the reader that Ramanujan has not severed his associations with India despite his long residence in the United States of America. He rather frequently resorts to native themes and traditions."⁵

POETRY:

1. The Striders (1966).
2. Relations: Poems (1971).
3. Selected Poems (1976).
4. Second Sight (1986).

TRANSLATIONS :

1. Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology (1965).
2. The Interior Landscape (1967)
3. No Lotus in a Navel (1969)
4. Speaking of Siva (1972)
5. Samskara (1976)
6. Hymns for Drowning (1981)
7. Poems of Love and War (1985)

Ramanujan, who followed with interest the way Kannada poets were modernizing their verse, began publishing poems in 1955 in the first issues of Quest, Thought and The Illustrated Weekly. He contributed ^{to} the journal Poetry India and also Dom Moraes's John Nobody. His poems were published in a number of well-known literary journals and periodicals in both India and abroad such as, Poetry, The Atlantic Monthly, London Magazine, The Chicago Review New York Times, and New England Review. His poems also found a place in The Penguin Book of Love Poems (1974). Many Indian editors also gave the eminent place to his poems in their anthologies. ?

1.1.2.1. THE STRIDERS (1966):

A.K. Ramanujan's The Striders, consisting of 41 poems, was first submitted to Oxford University Press in India which, not having published any local poetry, sent the manuscript to England where it was accepted by Oxford and recommended to its members by the Poetry Book Society. Bruce King comments, "His poems had a highly accomplished, understated preciseness and economy of statement, symbol and narrative. Without any obvious formality of structure, they seemed perfectly formed and showed a range of technique beyond that of any previous Indian English poetry. It was a technique Ramanujan had learnt from his study of older Kannada and Tamil verse and Modern Kannada poets who blended Indian and European models into new forms. He showed that Indian poets could both be modern and work from within their own literary traditions. The

precision of language and image and the conciseness of each line, with their unpredictable changes in direction, were matched by a somewhat flat, unreverberant, sometimes off hand, sometimes irritated voice that suggested a complicated personality which implied more than was said.⁶ Ezekiel and Parthasarathy soon praised Ramanujan as the best of the Indian poets. As important as his technique was his use of his southern Indian Brahmin roots as a source, contrasting his life in America with his Tamil upbringing to create images of contemporary alienation set in specific situations. The divided heritage, Indian and Western, of Indian poets had not before been handled so subtly and without self-consciousness.

K.R. Shrinivasa Iyengar comments on The Striders: "In The Striders, Ramanujan summons from the hinterland of memory buried moments of suspense, surprise or agony and turns them into disturbingly vivid poems. The mutilated beggar, the drowned woman, -- they are caught in their contortions and misery, and they are there like the denizens of Dante's hell. The images are unforgettable, but perhaps there isn't always the touch of compassion to redeem the doomed."⁷ And Harriet Zinnes, in her review of the book, says, "Although Mr. Ramanujan writes frequently about his childhood Indian experiences, and thus flavours the poems with images of figtrees, mynahs, snakes, Madurai, a Delhi sundial, he is completely western in language, diction and attitude toward the object."⁸

Some of the best poems in this collection are, On

Why
underline?

the Very Possible Jaundice of an Unborn Daughter, A Leaky Tap after a Sister's Wedding, Looking for a Cousin on a Swing, Snakes, Breaded Fish, Epitaph on a Street Dog, The River, An Image for Politics, Still Another View of Grace, Conventions of Despair and Self-Portrait.

1.1.2.2. RELATIONS (1971) :

The second volume of Ramanujan, Relations consisting of thirty-three poems, appeared along with Mahapatra's Close the Sky, Ten by Ten and Swayamvara and Other Poems. It evoked a mixed reaction in readers. K.R. Shrinivas Iyengar saw it as "an even maturer achievement, a kind of bridge spanning childhood and age, and India and America,"⁹ while another mentioned that "The promise of the first has not been fulfilled in the second."¹⁰ Bruce King observes, "While he may use memories of South India as his subject, his concern is rather with how the past has shaped him than as nostalgia for a lost paradise."¹¹ Further, he gives the estimate of Ramanujan's poetry as: "Ramanujan's concern is with memory and the way it establishes or falsifies relationships in a changing world. The poems of disdain towards India could be matched by poems which offer a less attractive portrait of Chicago, where Ramanujan lives and teaches. Ramanujan is neither a nostalgic traditionalist nor an advocate of modernization and westernization. He is a product of both and his poems reflect a personality conscious of change, enjoying its vitality, freedom and contradictions, but also aware of memories which form his inner self, memories of an

unconscious 'namelessness', which are still alive, at the foundations of the self."¹²

The title of the volume, Relations, is taken from a classical Tamil poem (living/among relations/binds the feet). Most of his poems in this collection are concerned with relationships (with his wife, mother, father, cousins and other relations) and have Indian subject-matter. His deep meditation over Hindu philosophy is reflected in the poems like, One, Two, May be Three Arguments Against Suicide, The 'Hindoo' Poems and The Prayers to Lord Murugan. His wit ironically touches the miserable lot of India in the poems, Last of the Princes or Compensations. The marvelous piece The Small Scale Reflections on a Great House discloses the all-inclusive nature of Indian culture. The other poems are also fine pieces about the themes of search of self-identity or alienation.

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Ramanujan, has never lost his connection with Indian soil, culture and traditions, although being away from it.

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1.1.2.3. **SELECTED POEMS (1976) :**

A selection of the fine pieces from these two volumes appeared in 1976 with the title, Selected Poems. Fifteen poems from The Striders and sixteen poems from Relations are included in it.

1.1.2.4. **SECOND SIGHT (1986):**

This volume of poetry was published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi, in 1986. Bruce King says:

"Second Sight denies that Indians have any unique spiritual knowledge about life after death and pleads for a return to the instinctual world of the senses, while being aware that active involvement in the world of desire leads to failure and childish rages. Although rejecting the contemplative other world lines of latter-day Hinduism, Ramanujan uses classical Indian and Buddhist philosophical distinctions to present a modern, psychologically influenced vision of life".¹³

1.1.2.5. TRANSLATIONS :

FIFTEEN POEMS FROM A CLASSICAL TAMIL ANTHOLOGY (1965):

He also translated in English, with great simplicity and force, some of the love lyrics from the Kurunthohai. These have won praise from Tamil and English scholars alike and it is no small achievement to have matched the old sophistication of romantic love to the current sophistication of linguistic finish.

THE INTERIOR LANDSCAPE (1967): He was awarded the Gold Medal of the Tamil Writers Association for this book in 1969.

NO LOTUS IN A NAVAL (1969): The Tamil poetry Hokkulalli Huvilla is translated as No Lotus In a Navel and published in 1969.

SPEAKING OF SHIVA (1972): It was published by Princeton University Press and was nominated for the 1974 National Book Award in the United States.

SAMSKARA (1976) : It is a translation of a Kannada move, Samskara, by V.R. Anantha Murthy.

HYMNS FOR THE DROWNING (1981): It was published by Princeton University Press and bears testimony to his genius as a translator.

Poems of Love and War is published in 1985.

Ramanujan's creative work, both as a poet and a translator has drawn praise from the English-speaking world. And hence, it is not surprising that, among the Indo-Anglican poets, he is the most widely published.

1.2. JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: LIFE AND WORKS :

1.2.1. LIFE :

Jayanta Mahapatra is a milestone in the history of Indo-English literature. He is born in Cuttack, Orissa, in 1928. His family is an Indian Christian family. He completed his school-education in Stewart European School. He did his B.Sc. with Physics from Ravenshaw College, Cuttack and he completed his M.Sc. at Science College, Patna. He started his career as a college lecturer in Physics. He began writing poetry at the age of thirty-eight. His motherland, Orissa inspired him. Mahapatra himself has argued about his connection with mother land :

"I suppose I can never write anywhere but in Orissa. I would say that my romance with Orissa and my romance with poetry starts with my birth, even though I wrote rather late. I was born on the bank of a river, I have been living there ever since. One of my earliest recollections is of my father carrying me to the grounds of a

small temple when an earthquake was at its height. From then on I suppose my life has moved with the rural atmosphere, the rural environment of Orissa, the river which comes through in most of my poems, and the temple's bitter-sweet bell. So these things have occupied quite a place in my poetry."¹⁴

This loyalty to the soil is expressed throughout his poetry.

1.2.2. WORKS :

At first, Mahapatra began writing short stories which he published in journals and still writes short stories occasionally. But he turned to poetry rather late, at the age of thirty-eight. Bruce King has rightly commented on the continuous development in Mahapatra's poetry, "Puzzling over his own distance - as a rationalist born into a Christian family - from the traditions of rural Hindu India, Mahapatra showed how it is possible to use modern alienation and the methods of experimental poetry while feeling the continuing relevance of the past".¹⁵

According to Mahapatra himself, "A great poem lets us embark on a sort of journey or voyage through symbols and allusion to encompass the human condition".¹⁶ In fact, Mahapatra deserves to be better known in our country as most of his poems have the authenticity and honesty of the best poems written in any Indian language. He speaks with the passion and assurance of an insider. As G.N. Davy

points out, "He has been able to make a quick transition from modernism to post-modernism, from an ironic, selfconscious poetry of cultural decadence, and of rupture within the tradition, to a poetry of compassionate turning of the consciousness towards the 'thing-in-itself'".¹⁷

Mahapatra does not comment on the absurdities and confusions in life in contemporary India. His poetry is of non-comment which centres round silence. From his first volume of poetry Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971) to the volume, Selected Poems (1987), his output indicates the fast improvement in its quality. His major works are:

1. Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971)
2. Swayamvara and other poems (1971)
3. A Father's Hours (1976)
4. A Rain of Rites (1976)
5. Waiting (1979)
6. The False Start (1980)
7. Relationship (1980)
8. Life Signs (1983)
9. Dispossessed Nests (1986)
10. Burden of Waves and Fruit (1986)
11. Selected Poems (1987)
12. Temple (1989)
13. Whiteness of Bone (1992)
14. TRANSLATIONS :
 1. Counter measures (1973)
 2. Wings of the Past (1976)
 3. Songs of Kujia and other poems (1981)

15. Short Stories :

1.2.2.1. **CLOSE THE SKY, TEN BY TEN (1971)**: It is published by Dialogue Publications, Calcutta, and consists of forty-nine poems. Many of these poems are curious produced by emotion. The poems treat of loneliness, the impossibility of expressing the meaningful, the misunderstandings in people, moments of sexual desire, the pregnant silence, the imaginations of human mind, the contrast between the private and public world, Indian myth and ritual, dreams and identity. The symbols used by Mahapatra are - the sky, crows, flames, trees, the seasons, walls, distance. The images, symbols and references relate the poems to one another, establishing unity. About its technique Bruce King comments: "The technique in Close the Sky, Ten by Ten is significant of nature of Mahapatra's early work in which experiment with form, language, image, sound prevails over emotion".¹⁸

1.2.2.2. **SWAYAMVARA AND OTHER POEMS (1971)**:

This volume was also published in the same year with Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, but it was published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. The volume consists of thirty-three poems, in which Mahapatra appears to move towards precision, by relating his craft more to the concrete than to the abstract, both in terms of themes and expression. S.K. Desai observes, "What gives tremendous strength to Mahapatra's poetry is his juxtaposition of the concrete and the abstract and of the expected and the unexpected, the

juxtaposition of the concrete and the abstract and of the expected and the unexpected, the juxtaposition often The juxtaposition becomes fusion when the poet is concentrating on an intense concrete experience involving the senses, feelings and thoughts all together".¹⁹ In the context of the last poem "The Faith", K. Ayyappa Panikar remarks, "This poem impresses its Indianness upon the reader without undue strain. The only word that palpably points to a specific locale is 'Puri', but the total impression is unobtrusively built up in the natural movement of the poem. In some other poems of Mahapatra such as Indian Summer Poem, Evening in an Orissa Village, The Orissa Poems, Three Indian Poems, The Indian Way, etc., the strain is obvious".²⁰

1.2.2.3. A FATHER'S HOURS (1976) :

In this book, Mahapatra seems to use various shades of irony. That was the period of his intense intercourse with society. There is no other work as icy in its irony as A father's Hours. He himself and his people are each a moment of consciousness; sometimes they clash, sometimes they instill into each other. The poem, The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic is remarkable for its painful irony.

1.2.2.4. THE RAIN OF RITES (1976):

In this poem the shift towards greater attempt to make the imagination more precise and more defining in its operation than in the earlier poems. The poems in thi

volume treat the themes of solitude and expressions of the nuances of feelings which arise during isolation, loneliness and silence. Bruce King observes; "Few poems affirm. Most question, ending in uncertainty or defeat. They are lyrics of a troubled soul, of a weary, undefined unhappiness. The monsoon season, which provides symbols for A Rain of Rites, is both a time of gray skies, disasters and depressions and also a period of renewal, birth, vegetation, after the dry, stifling Indian Summer".²¹

1.2.2.5. WAITING (1979):

It consists of short lyrics and a few longer poems. The poems describe the physical world and social realities before moving on to the imaginative, the language is plainer the syntax less ambiguous. There is more punctuation and less fragmentation. Mahapatra is unable to ignore Hindu culture and appears in many poems to accept its world view, including reincarnation, while in other poems he is troubled by Christian guilt and his divided inheritance, his preoccupation with his relationship to his past and Indian culture. The recurrence of specifically Indian scenes give Waiting a unity. Bruce King compares Mahapatra's poetry to the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Thomas Gray and Dylan Thomas and then asserts the uniqueness of his poetry.²²

1.2.2.6. THE FALSE START (1980):

It includes poems first published as early as 1975, offers the impression of change and advance in subject

matter and style. The poems, line lengths, verse paragraphs are longer and marked by a meditative mood, a convention of addressing an undesignated 'you' is observed, and there is a unity of theme within each of the three sections into which the contents of the book are divided. As John Oliver Perry observes: "The False Start (1980) opens with A Day of Rain, Mahapatra's continuing figure for his experience -of pain, dreariness, sorrow, of relief from heat, of flooding, overwhelming, sensational life. And later in The False Start poems as opaque as this occur, using the verbal tricks of modern indeterminacy"²⁵.

1.2.2.7. RELATIONSHIP (1980):

It is a twelve-part 'dream' of Orissa, its myths, symbols, history, and of Mahapatra's private emotions, especially of sex, family history and his relationship to the past, traditions and the land. The principal aim of the poet is to convey the integrity of his multifarious experience, the underlying a esthetic unity implicit in that variegated feel of life of past and present.

The final message that emerges from Mahapatra's poetry, Relationship in particular, seems to be a message of involvement and action rather than escape or inaction. Action here, means acceptance of life as it is with all its past and present as well as implications for the future. It is an acceptance rooted in awareness which will make him wait, for the moments of revelation. It's theme and grandeur brought Sahitya Academy Award in 1981.

1.2.2.8. **LIFE SIGNS (1983):**

In Life Signs, there is a continuing air of sadness, defeat, spiritlessness and consciousness, of death. Mahapatra makes a distinction familiar to Hindu metaphysics between the illusions of the world of appearance and spiritual reality, Poetry speaks of 'needs', the need to feel alive, the need to impregnate the world with significance, love it, wed it. These are the 'life signs'. The poems in Life Signs mostly ask the same questions about reality and develop in the same way, by a dialectic of questions which generate categories, from the same kinds of feelings and problems as the earlier volumes.

1.2.2.9. **DISPOSSESSED NESTS (1986):**

The social and political scene dominates in his Dispossessed Nests. Mahapatra has expressed his awareness of the contemporary situations, in this verse collection. The elements like the betrayal of political leaders, threat of multi-National companies, terrorism, have darkened the social life and the common man is alone in his suffering. In this respect, Mahapatra deals more effectively with subjects like the Punjab turmoil and the Bhopal gas tragedy. The lost spiritual struggle of each individual to face dark realities is focussed by the poet. This is emphasized by the poet, in this collection.

1.2.2.10. **BURDEN OF WAVES AND FRUIT (1986):**

This collection contains the poems dealing with the present situation around the poet.

1.2.2.11. SELECTED POEMS (1987):

This is a collection of selected pieces from his poetry.

1.2.2.12. and 13. His recent verse collections Temple (1989) and A Whiteness of Bone (1992) are about the predicament of man in the modern world.

The sociopolitical concerns found in Mahapatra's poetry are unique. No other Indian poet has handled political subjects as competently as Mahapatra has.

1.2.2.14. TRANSLATIONS :

Mahapatra has translated Orian poetry into English. His translations include: Counter measures (1973) by Soubhagya Mishra Kumar, Wings of the Past (1976) by Jadanath Das Mahapatra, and Songs of Kubja and other poems (1981) by Sitakant Mahapatra.

1.2.2.15. SHORT-STORIES :

Mahapatra's prose is found in Tales From Fakirmohan, True Tales of Travel and Adventure, and 'Orissa'. He has also written a book on the history of Orissa.

His poems appeared in numerous journals of repute all over the world such as - Ariel, Critical Quarterly, Times Literary Supplement, Boundary-2, Hudson Review, and Sewanee Review. He has been represented in various anthologies in India and abroad. He is the founder-editor of Chandrabhaga, a magazine devoted to new writing from

India, but now folded up, and the poetry-editor of Calcutta's 'Telegraphy.' He has also guest-edited a special India issue of South and West magazine (U.S.A.).

Dr.R.Raj Rao has enlisted the Awards received by Mahapatra and also mentioned his reputation, "The string of international awards that Mahapatra received for his poetry would give many leading poets a complex. These include the Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award (1975), The Japan Foundation Visitor's Award (1980), The Sahitya Academy Award (1981) and the Rockefeller Foundation Award (1986). In the course of his work as a poet, he has been invited to the United States, England, Australia, Japan, the U.S.S.R. and Italy. In 1976 he was a Visiting Writer at the University of Iowa's prestigious International Writing Programme. Two full length studies have already been published in India".²⁴

and Germany too.

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