

A K Ramanujan as a Poet

Introduction

Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan (16 March 1929 – 13 July 1993) was an Indian poet and scholar of Indian literature and Linguistics. Ramanujan was also a professor of Linguistics at University of Chicago.

Ramanujan was a poet, scholar, Linguist, philologist, folklorist, translator, and playwright. His academic research ranged across five languages: English, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Sanskrit. He published works on both classical and modern variants of this literature and argued strongly for giving local, non-standard dialects their due. Though he wrote widely and in a number of genres, Ramanujan's poems are remembered as enigmatic works of startling originality, sophistication and moving artistry. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award posthumously in 1999 for *The Collected Poems*. His poetic output is slender. His English poems are included in these two volumes: *The Striders* and *Relations*. His poetry is an expression of Indian sensibility, sharpened and nourished by Western education and environment. His Indian sensibility finds its superb expression in poems dealing with familial relationships, like “Of Mothers Among Other Things,” conveys to the readers his own expressions of his own mother at different stages of her life. No doubt, he is a skilled craftsman.

Contribution

A. K. Ramanujan's theoretical and aesthetic contributions span several disciplinary areas. In his cultural essays such as “There an Indian Way of Thinking?” (1990), he explains cultural ideologies and behavioral manifestations thereof in terms of an Indian psychology he calls “context-sensitive” thinking. In his work in folklore studies, Ramanujan highlights the inter-textuality of the Indian oral and written literary tradition. His essay “Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections” (1989), and his commentaries in *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967) and *Folktales from India, Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages* (1991) are good examples of his work in Indian folklore studies.

Literary Career

In his teenage years, Ramanujan wanted to be a magician and very often he would try his skills at magic tricks. He was educated at Marimallappa High School and Maharaja College of Mysore. In his first year Ramanujan majored in Science but later changed to English. He also got a graduate diploma in theoretical Linguistics. He was also a Fellow of Deccan College at Pune in 1958-59.

Ramanujan taught at various colleges in South India but mainly in Belgaum in 1950s. In 1958 he went to the United States for his PhD in Linguistics at Indianan University. In 1962 Ramanujan was appointed to the University of Chicago where he remained for about thirty years.

Besides these, Ramanujan also taught at several other universities such as Harvard, University of Wisconsin, University of California at Berkeley, Carleton College and University of Michigan.

Ramanujan was a bi-lingual writer. Besides being a poet, he was a translator and essayist. In his poems one can find the taste of inter-textuality and hybridity. At the age of thirty his first collection of poems titled *The Striders* was published in 1966. His later collections were *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1986) and *Collected Poems* in 1995.

Ramanujan's translations from Tamil, Kannada and Telegu made him internationally popular. Some of his translations are *Interior Landscape* (1967), *Speaking of Siva* (1973), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), and *Poems of Love and War* (1985) and so on.

His very first book was a collection of proverbs in Kannada which was published in 1955. For the next forty years he wrote extensively on subjects like 'The Indian Oedipus', 'On Folk Mythologies and Folk Puranas' and 'Who Needs Folklore?'. These have been collectively published in *Collected Essays* in 1999. The last book to be published was *Folklore of India* in 1991. Ramanujan's translations of the poems from the *Kuruntokai*, one of the eight anthologies of classical Tamil appeared in American journals as early as in 1964 and in *Writers Workshop* in 1965. In his essay titled 'Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translations' (1999) became a topic of extreme controversy.

The essay showed with different versions of the great Indian epic, the Ramayana from the traditional pattern challenging history. The essay was a part of the prescribed course at under-graduate level but it was banned in 2011. Ramanujan has been awarded with the prestigious Padma Shri in 1976 and MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1983.

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Note: These notes have been consolidated from open sources on the Internet.