

Chapter – IV

Imagery – a study of its origin and function

Images consult

one

another,

a conscience –

stricken

jury,

and come

slowly

to a sentence. (CP: 142)

Image, “a mystical potency” (Lewis. 1947. 17), the soul of poetry, is an indispensable wealth of the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. The string of images, which constitute his poetry are not mere embellishment but rather they unfold the themes of his poems. Imagery and meaning are so integrated that they cannot be segregated. The images, as Ramanujan has conceived of them are like “conscience-/stricken/jury” who act upon one another and are ready to pass the death sentence and finally when the images pass the ‘death sentence’, it gives birth to a poem. A poem, therefore, is made of images “which in awareness and ethical sense operate upon each other to form a seemingly ordered grammatical sentence and thought” (King. 1991. 84). Ramanujan has the gift of intuitive perception and his piercing eye can spy similarity in things dissimilar. As a conscious creative artist, he is deeply concerned with the problems of a creative writer and in the title poem of The Black Hen he deals with two types of creativity-

the natural and the artificial. "As is the way of modern poetry it is prosaic and low-key; but the image does the job of poetry if the words do not" (Winter. 1996. 3.). For Wordsworth "all good poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Jones. 1971. 5) and to Keats "poetry had better come as naturally as leaves to a tree or not at all" (winter. 1996. 3). Ramanujan acquiesces what Keats had said:

It must come as leaves
 to a tree
 or not at all. (CP: 195)

The artificial creativity, on the other hand, is not as instinctive as the natural one and hence, a poet has to rely on an artistic and a linguistic competence to accomplish perfection:

yet it comes sometimes
 as the black hen
 with the red round eye
 on the embroidery
 stitch by stitch
 dropped and found again (Ibid)

The images of "knitting" and "stitching", of "dropped and found again" refer to the second rank of poetry, which is spurious and unnatural. This poem abounds in images and affirms that an image is the "primary pigment" (Kermode. 1971. 153) of his poetry.

Before embarking upon the discussion of the major images in the poetry of Ramanujan it is pertinent to discourse about the origin and the function of imagery in the poetry. We should also touch upon symbol, which according to Yeats is "an image

that has transcended particular time and place, becomes a symbol, passes beyond death, as it were, and becomes a living soul"¹.

Many thousands of years ago a primitive man sitting in the depth of a jungle, became alive to a sensation of clawing in 'the pit of his stomach'- the basic organic demand of hunger. His brain-function was very dense and in a state of static immobility without any faculty of thinking the urge of the pang of hunger continued and in desperation he pounced upon a bird, like a bird of prey, but it flew away, then a hare which scampered away to the nearest bush, a rat which scurried away to a hole under a tree, a snake which slithered away to the pool of water close by, a fish which dived down a mountain stream—a total failure in all his attempts, which dejected him to a great extent. As he was frustrated in all his attempts he threw instinctively a stone, which killed a bird of a flock nearby. Thus, necessity being the mother of invention and this action having borne fruit made him avoid further frustration in future. This was at the root of the first of imagination. A fundamental and basic demand of nature created a proclivity in him to find food. This struggle of a human mind to satisfy a certain organic demand followed by an instinctive impulse to throw a stone and his subsequent innate effort towards success evolved a process of thinking in his brain, which was at the root of the origin of imagery. The next stage of his imagination developed in a like manner due to his other personal demands and this primitiveness is at the root of all imageries - ancient or modern. An image is, therefore, the creation of imagination but when we see an object or a scenery suddenly, the image is already there and imagination follows it and in this case the image creates the imagination. Thus, the relation between image and imagination is both mutual and reciprocal. Both are correlative and collateral. Since poetry springs from imagination "the images enter a poem by the right of analogy, as flowers entered

Plato's descriptions of his mystical and abstract Heaven" (MacNeice. 1968. 91). While indicating the origin of an image, W.B. Yeats writes in the poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion":

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind ...² (SP: 202)

His poem consists of masterful images and the sources of images are numerous:

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 : * Old iron, old bones, old rags, ...³ (Ibid)

Poetry may be sublime and great, but its constituent element – an image can grow out of sensual, small and gross realities of life.

The poet uses an image for the sake of clarity and it is through an image that he gives himself away. For critics of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries imagery is an "ornament, mere decoration, like cherries tastefully arranged on a cake" (Lewis. 1947. 18). The Elizabethans used emotional or sensuous type of image, which was often evocative but indistinct, whereas the poets of the seventeenth century tended to abandon it. The Caroline poets used sharp and precise images. The Romantic poets with a new attitude to life or to the world were more interested in natural objects and used sensuous images to convey the appearance of an object. A poetic image is not only a sensuous picture made out of words reflecting an accurate picture of external reality but also conveys the truth hidden behind it. It looks out from a mirror the life and perceives not only its face but reveals some truth about its face. Keats in "Ode to Autumn" evidences the significance of the patterning of an image:

: * SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness!

Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
 To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; ...⁴

The poem, besides presenting a vivid and concrete picture of autumn, has personified autumn as a full-grown entity lingering and dying. The serene ripe beauty of the season is a prelude to death. There is a suggestion of fertility and ripeness on the edge of dissolution. Death is implicit in fulfilment and so the fruitfulness suggests a tragic destiny of Nature.

The Victorian poets used the Romantic type of image and the modernist poetry inherited imagery both from recent French poetry and from the late Elizabethan and the Metaphysical poetry. The contemporary Indian poets in English are primarily concerned with the complexities and hard realities. They give vent to their experiences by way of sophisticated imagery. M.K. Naik observes, "the imagery of a poet is a true index to the quality of his sensibility, and the Indian poet's imagery should bear the hallmark of the individuality of his experience" (Naik. 1980. 39).

The tradition of employing images is vehemently nurtured by A. K. Ramanujan. He makes an extensive use of imagery and even the names of some of his poems "Breaded Fish", "Images" etc are imagistic in configuration. The poem, "Images", is itself an image composed of 'multiplicity of images'. The poet describes his meeting with a celebrity who does not remember him in an image:

I will pass from his mind

as image from a mirror. (CP: 44)

As a result, he remains weather-blown, faceless and restless which is articulated with two beautiful carved images:

Waking is a blow
 of light;
 and walking, a sleet
 of faceless acquaintances. (Ibid)

Some of his poems seem to be the outcome of a single running image:

The entire island:
 an alligator
 sleeping in a mask of stone.
 a grain of land
 even on good days; on bad,
 the ocean foams in that mouth. (CP: 28)

In the modern age the most characteristic of the art of poetry is the use of 'new and striking' images, which are employed widely by Ramanujan in his poetry. Thus, in "Breaded Fish" we have "a hood/of memory like a coil on a heath/opened in my eyes," (CP: 7), in "Poona Train Window", "The tea/darkens like a sick/traveller's urine" (CP: 81) and a man between the two rocks looks like "the symmetry/of human buttocks" (Ibid). These images unveil the analogy of things as perceived by the poet and thus express the implicit likeness.

The vivifying function of imagery is to present a theme in a concrete form. India and her people constitute one of the major themes of the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. He gives us the first hand account of his experience in India. So, with a purpose to evoke a typical Indian response, he often writes about the Indian heritage and culture

and the Indian milieu. While talking of India, he exploits powerful and startling images:

And ideas behave like rumours,
 once casually mentioned somewhere
 they come back to the door as prodigies

born to prodigal father, (CP: 98)

The profound and precise imagery of Ramanujan's poetry can flash a social observation. It can depict not only a common, everyday phenomenon of Indian life, but can hold up a mirror to the realities of life. Reflection of the external reality of "the beggar" is poverty and an image of poverty-ridden India has been delineated by Nissim Ezekiel in his poem "In India":

Here among the beggars,
 Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
 Hutment dwellers, slums,
 Dead souls of men and gods,
 Burnt out mothers, frightened
 Virgins, wasted child
 And tortured animal,
 All in noisy silence
 Suffering the place and time.⁵

Ramanujan presents a similar picture of the beggars in the poem "Element of Composition". Poverty, squalor and ugliness of the Indian lepers come up brilliantly in an image:

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 ... (CP: 122)

Images reveal the personality of a poet—his “innermost likes and dislikes, observations and interests, associations of thought, attitudes of mind and beliefs” (Spurgeon. 1935. 4). Ramanujan’s poetry is a world created from all that he has seen, known, felt, heard and thought, and his image-making faculty, his imagination blend together with his memories, which have sunk deep into his consciousness. This great memory as Yeats describes “is also a dwelling-house of symbols, of images that are living souls”⁶. The awareness of the past in a present moment is transmitted through images. An image, for Ramanujan is a mode of communication and he has used telling images to express his own impression of his mother during her youth:

I smell upon this twisted

blackbone tree the silk and white

petal of my mother’s youth.

From her ear-rings three diamonds

splash a handful of needles,

and I see my mother run back

from rain to the crying cradles. (CP: 61)

One of the functions of poetry "is to awaken the dead" (Drew, 1933. 151.) and the poet brings life to the spirit of his readers by making words alive and they almost visualize the scene as if they are present before their eyes. Such realistic and impressionistic images are used by K.N. Daruwalla in his poem "The Ghaghar in Spate" to present a lifelike picture of a devastating flood:

And through the village

the Ghaghra steers her course:

thatch and dung-cakes turn to river-scum,

a buffalo floats over to the rooftop

where the men are stranded.

Three days of hunger, and her udders

turn red-rimmed and swollen

with milk-extortion.⁷

The poetic image as C.D. Lewis defines "is a more or less sensuous picture in words, to some degree metaphorical, with an undernote of human emotion in its context, but also charged with and releasing into the reader a special poetic emotion or passion" (Lewis. 1947. 22). These 'word-pictures' not only "illustrate, illuminate and embellish his thought" (Spurgeon. 1935. 9), but the description the poet puts forth by means of analogy creates an atmosphere and evokes an emotion in the reader and he is stirred by the wholeness and richness of the scene:

every summer

a river dries to a trickle

in the sand,

baring the sand-ribs,

straw and women's hair

clogging the watergates
 : * at the rusty bars
 under the bridges with patches
 of repair all over them,
 the wet stones glistening like sleepy
 crocodiles, the dry ones
 shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun. (CP: 38)

Ramanujan, like a true artist paints 'cameo-like pictures' which elucidate the fact that he has not only an eye for detail but has the ability to recapture the very moment and presents us with the photographic accuracy:

Three women with baskets
 on their heads, climbing
 slowly against the slope
 of a hill, one of them
 lop-sided, balancing
 between the slope and
 the basket on the head
 : * a late pregnancy. (CP: 80-81)

"The essential quality and function of imagery," as Fogle says, "is a kind of creation; by bringing together of diverse objects, states of mind, or concepts new relationships are discovered, new connections between subject and object become apparent" (Fogle. 1949. 23). The creative power of imagery 'builds new structures of thoughts', enriches our knowledge of ourselves and of the world. It establishes a rapport between objects or ideas and, therefore, unsheathes the pattern of the world of reality as well as the mind of the poet. Ramanujan "looks at and into the things as they

are" (Mohanty. "Things as They are..." 1999. 165.) and can discern a similitude between oranges and human reality in respect of their origin. The apparent disparity fades away and he discovers a resemblance in the process of their creation, which he sets forth in a concrete image:

But
 every one of these
 had an absurd, almost human
 umbilicus
 at the top
 where once the Tree
 had poured its
 future
 from forgotten roots
 and possessed it close,
 to feed
 this Fall-minded
 pot-bellied
 bud
 till it rounded
 for our baskets. (CP: 54)

A careful study of the imagery of Ramanujan ascertains the fact that the imagery serves all three functions—mental, figurative and symbolic—in his poetry. Different feelings, passions of heart get appropriate expression by means of the poetic image and it records a single sensation. The image, as Miss Downey says, "must not be conceived as a material copy or thing but merely as the content of a thought in which

attention is centred on sensory quality of some sort" (Preminger. 1975 .363). It is an expression of a sense experience, revokes the original sensation and endows us with different kinds of mental pictures. Imagery as Miss Edith Rickert conceives "is a mode of expressing experience in the form of mental pictures" (Fogle. 1949. 5). All poets do not have the same kind of sensory capacity and different poets excel in exerting different kinds of mental pictures. Much of Browning's imagery is tactile. One can observe the pre-dominance of tactile and organic images in the poetry of Keats, whereas in Shelley we find plethora of imagery of motion. These mental images vivify the object and bring out the sensuous qualities of objects. Ramanujan uses all categories of images and one single image employed in his poem can arouse two different feelings:

A basketful of ritual cobras
comes into the tame little house,

... ..

They lick the room with their bodies, (CP: 4)

Here the feelings of sight and touch are powerfully combined. The word 'lick' combines two feelings—the feeling of sight as well as touch. Sound and sight are compressed in the image of a 'swing':

Sister swinging high
on the creaky swings (CP: 155)

Touch and sound are pressed in the image of a woodpecker in the poem "A Leaky Tap After a Sister's Wedding":

It is a single summer woodpecker
peck-peck-Peck-pecking away
at that tree

behind the kitchen (CP: 9)

The image of smoke in the opening line of "One More After Reading Homer" incites a sensation of vision and smell:

any cassandra with some e s p
 can see the smoke grow thick
 between her and the city faces (CP: 73)

Transfer of feeling to an object is a special function of an image and this trait is known as synaesthesia. 'Roaring bus' is such an example. "Roaring" is generally associated with a lion angry at heart. But the feeling of anger is transferred to the bus and thus, a living quality is transmitted to a non-living one:

the swastika
 on the neighbour's arm
 in that roaring bus from a grey
 nowhere to a green. (CP: 75)

Another function of imagery is to communicate the ideas to the readers in figurative language in order to concretize the theme of the poetry. As it is "a picture made out of words" so "an epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or passage on the face of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality" (Lewis. 1947. 18). The images of "tongue", "bark", "mouth", "fingers", "rice" and "kitchen floor" in the concluding stanza of "Of Mothers, among others things" function as literal objects and stimulate the emotion of pity and sympathy:

My cold parchment tongue licks bark
 in the mouth when I see her four

still sensible fingers slowly flex

to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor. (CP: 61)

The images in this stanza function literally and the objects are not interlinked figuratively.

The figurative function of imagery opens a new horizon in the field of grammar. A figure of speech or any parts of speech has tremendous potentiality to form an image. Miss Spurgeon says, "I use the term 'image' here as the only available word to cover every kind of simile, as well as every kind of what is really compressed simile-metaphor" (Spurgeon. 1935. 5). A great deal of similes and metaphors have been employed by Ramanujan to draw the analogy between different objects. The sprouting of 'six grains' in the poem "Foundlings in the Yukon" has been described through a series of similes:

they took root

within forty-eight hours

and sprouted

a candelabra of eight small leaves. (CP: 196)

and they 'unfurled' rapidly and like human beings are eager to have their genes passed on to their progeny:

as if long deep

burial had made them hasty

for birth and season, for names,

genes, for passing on: (Ibid)

The quick sprouting of the seeds is compared to the racial memory of men:

like the kick

and shift of an intra-uterine

memory, (Ibid)

It is then compared to the:

...pent-up

centenarian's sudden burst

of lust, ... (CP: 197)

Ramanujan has the ability to perceive the hidden likeness and can undrape "the permanent analogy of things by images, which participate in the life of truth" (Spurgeon. 1935. 7). In "The Fall", he describes a parachute jumper and how the silken parachute unfurls behind him and protects him against the 'howling winds' like "a mothercat's teeth/on the scruff of her kitten" (CP: 51) and how the air protects him like a child:

the very air a sheath

of safety

for the floating, the amniotic floating without hands

into an exhilaration

of larks, ... (CP: 51)

Ramanujan, with his poetic imagination "reconciles" thought and feeling, reason and imagination and can invent metaphor by which "disparate and hitherto unconnected things are brought together in poetry" (Preminger. 1975. 366). The movement of the snake as he trampled over it, the 'certainties' of time as ensured by the four-faced clocks on the market-towers and by the watches on the uncertain pulse have been skilfully analysed by means of metaphors:

... : I see him turn,

the green white of his belly

measured by bluish nodes, a water-bleached lotus stalk

plucked by a landsman hand. (CP: 5)

Four-faced clocks on market-towers school the town

and make the four directions sell and buy

in the stalls below where watches run

their certainties on the uncertain pulse. (CP: 8)

Sometimes, he seems to create life, or instils life into the things apparently lifeless.

Hence, he employs personification when he refers to the mechanism of a sundial,

which remains non-functional from dusk to dawn:

... Only they

sleep with us in the dark and wake into time

with the light of the moon like antiquity's

lovers. (Ibid)

Images open a new horizon in the field of grammar. Any parts of speech have tremendous potentiality to form an image. Similarly, an image has the power to convey the sense of any parts of speech. Verbs are often used metaphorically and consequently they are regarded as image making verbs:

a female ape with a black striped snout

sniff and lick lettuce leaves clean for her lord (CP: 217)

yellow trees bend over broken glass. (CP: 57)

The poetic imagery serves the symbolic function in the poetry of Ramanujan. A symbol is a recurrent image which stands for a person, an object or idea and which "instead of referring to something directly, refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else" (Chadwick. 1971. 1). The poet is a prophet, endowed with the

power to see behind and beyond the objects of the real world and can discern inherent characteristics concealed in the ideal world. It is by means of symbols that he communicates the essence of things. A symbol, therefore, is “the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame”⁸. It penetrates beyond reality into a world of ideas. A poet organizes images with relation to one another by means of ‘symbolic kinship’ and many images become potentially symbolic not only through likeness but also through one sort of association and so symbols can be interchangeably used with images. As we read the poem we shift our attention from the image of an object to its symbolism. Image and symbol are two sides of the same coin and in the opinion of Burke “One cannot long discuss imagery without sliding into symbolism” (Preminger. 1975. 367).

Ramanujan communicates his personal feelings through images. Sometimes he records his emotion directly and explicitly and sometimes he resorts to images and symbols. As all his poetry is image-making, the symbol becomes an essential mode of expression for him. To avoid direct portraiture, he makes ample uses of symbols to suggest something beyond the expressed meaning. The image of the bright, burning tiger in Blake’s poetry stands for the ferocity of nature. The New England water insect in the title-piece “The Striders”, besides being a description of an insect, “symbolises the life and work of the poetic self riddled with various alienations” (Kurup. 1996. 191). The bug does not move along with the stream but it sits “and drowns eye-/deep/into its tiny strip/of sky” (CP: 3). The insect, like the poet is an alien and symbolises alienation, and “tiny strip/of sky” emblemizes Ramanujan’s world of relations whom he frequently mentions in his poems.

Many of the symbols of W.B. Yeats are incomprehensible as they are derived from his occult studies. Symbols used by Ramanujan are less obscure as they spring from his native experiences. He often uses traditional symbols:

every morning

is a morning after,

only night has a roof

and the day has weals

on her back, as if

she had slept on a rafter. (CP: 26)

Here day and night are the traditional symbols of life and death. The “weals on her back” are the effects of her previous life being carried over into this life. The “rafter” represents ‘the continuous flow of life’ and night’s roof typifies the limitations of death.

Robert Frost in his poem “Birches” (Williams. 1954. 243) speaks of climbing to the top of a birch tree and swinging on its back down to earth. These two actions ‘climbing up’ and ‘swinging down’ are highly symbolic and mean something more. The first action ‘climbing up’ means a release or a desire to get away from the difficulties and responsibilities of daily life, while the inherent meaning of ‘swinging down’, is a return to earth to live a life as God has wished for. Similarly, the image of climbing a staircase in T.S. Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” (Eliot. 1971. 60) suggests the idea of “raising” oneself spiritually or becoming purified. Ramanujan in his poem “The Fall” describes the experiences of a parachute jumper who realizes that his body is will-less and must surrender to the force of gravity:

he almost begins

to count,

till he reaches

his end, the Ground,

... ..

...

a fallen rider held by his reins

to a flight of horses. (CP: 52)

The image of the parachutist descending on earth symbolically “implies the descent of soul into human body” which “takes half a life span to sprout and take root in human consciousness” (Raghuandan. 1990. 189). The “fall” here implies a ‘total surrender of the soul to Super-human Force’, which “brings about the union of Spirit and Matter to produce a living being” (Ibid).

Since Indian philosophy nourishes his thought, Ramanujan is deeply aware of the Hindu tradition and so the symbols used by him are very significant as they have certain association with the Indian mind. In the poem, “The Opposable Thumb”, he brings out the importance of a thumb in the description of three types of hands. The thumb in the three different hands serves three different functions. The blind boy has an extra thumb, which actually means he has the capacity to perceive with an inner eye, which a man of normal vision cannot. A short thumb of the Muslim weaver signifies one who is a fanatic and cannot see anything in its proper perspective. The only thumb of the grandmother is unique as it relates to Purusha, who “no bigger than a thumb stands in man’s central self and is lord of what was and what shall be” (Raghuandan. 154). Thus, the thumb is a suggestive symbol with diverse connotations in varied contexts.

Ramanujan appears to us as an 'Imagist' as his poetry is more profound and precise in imagery, which not only flash a social observation but also gives us a personal cultural insight. The cluster of images used in his poems unfolds the theme of his poetry. At times his images are suggestive or symbolic and are used in figurative language to symbolize the theme of his poetry. His poems "are built up by clearly defined, sharp images which turn and turn, and are linked with such legendary flexibility that to separate one from the other becomes an impossibility" (Mohanty, "Time and Body..." 1998. 159).

Ramanujan is equally at home in two Indian languages—Tamil and Kannada. The epigraph poem that he chooses for his second collection, Relations, is taken from a classical Tamil Anthology which makes it clear that the poems included in this volume have drawn their sustenance from the Tamil poems. Images used in the Sangam poems have variety, subtlety and sophistication. He believes that the poems cannot be composed rapidly like oral epics, but it needs subtle care and artistry:

like a chariot wheel
 made thoughtfully
 over a month
 by a carpenter
 who tosses off eight chariots
 in a day⁹

The Tamil poets are minute and accurate observers of the fauna and flora of the Tamil regions, which are powerfully reflected in their images. Ramanujan is familiar with them and has employed them in many of his poems. In the poem *Kuruntokai*, Kapilar uses an image to describe herons looking for fish in the running waters:

There was only

a thin-legged heron standing
 on legs yellow as millet stems
 and looking

for lampreys

in the running water
 when he took me. ¹⁰

In Ramanujan's "Looking and Finding", herons make their appearance:

He can neither sleep nor wake from the one-legged sleep on this Chicago lake
 of yachts in full sail, herons playing at sages. (CP: 179)

Another *Kuruntokai* poem describes a young heroine who wonders, if there is
 someone like her, sick of love, spending sleepless night and hearing:

through the big rain
 blown about by the wind
 at midnight in the cold month

when the oxen
 shake off the buzzing flies
 again and again,

the poor thin chime
 of clappers
 in the crooked cowbells? ¹¹

We find similar descriptions in Ramanujan's poems where oxen yield place to
 buffaloes:

Buffaloes swatting flies
 with their tails. (CP: 81)

The streetcows have trapezium faces.

Buffaloes shake off flies with a twitch of ripples. (CP: 100)

A *Narrinai* heroine describes the fishermen “who go/from the little town in the seaside groves/into the sea ... spreading and drying meanwhile their nets/with many eyes, and knots”¹². This becomes a beautiful image to describe the past in “Love Poem for a Wife,2”:

soon to be myself, a man
 unhappy in the morning
 to be himself again,
 the past still there,
 a drying
 net on the mountain, (CP: 85)

It is said that the Tamils are famous for weaving thin muslin cloth and ancient and medieval Tamil poems abound with the images of muslin, waterfalls, snakeskin and stream:

There, among thin silver rills
 that look like hanging snake skins,
 high on the hill.¹³

Ramanujan uses all these images in his poems:

We eat legends and leavings,
 remember the ivory, the apes,
 the peacocks we sent in the Bible
 to Solomon, the medicines for smallpox,
 the similes
 for muslin: wavering snakeskins.

a cloud of steam. (CP: 115)

And then one sometimes sees waterfalls

as the ancient Tamils saw them,

wavering snakeskins,

cascades of muslin. (CP: 189)

Ramanujan intended to give Indian English poetry an indigenous tradition, not by blindly following the toes of the western poetic traditions, but by moulding the creative medium under the influence of the classical Tamil poetic traditions. The sharpness, the connectivity, the circularity of the images used by the classical Tamil and Kannada poets could shape and mould Ramanujan's images not only to give them a freshness and immediacy but also to engender in them a kind of authenticity and originality which are responsible for giving his poetry a specific indigenous identity, seminally and significantly Indian. Ramanujan is aware of this fact and he honestly admits:

English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my "outer" forms—linguistic, 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 preoccupations 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 where¹⁴.

Notes and References

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