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Colonial Memory and Cultural Resistance in the Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan

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Abstract

A. K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) is usually read as a poet of family, memory and linguistic plurality, and as one of the most important translators of classical Tamil and medieval Kannada poetry. This article proposes that these familiar emphases converge in a less often examined concern: the poet's negotiation of colonial memory and his practice of cultural resistance. Born in the princely state of Mysore and educated in English, Ramanujan inherited a colonial formation that he neither repudiated nor celebrated. Drawing on postcolonial theory of hybridity, nationalist thought and collective memory, the article argues that his poetry registers colonialism not as spectacular trauma but as domestic sediment, lodged in family, language and habits of knowledge. It then argues that his resistance operates through three strategies: translation as the recovery of non-colonial literary genealogies, an essayistic and poetic preference for context-sensitive thought over universal abstraction, and an ironic refusal of nativist nostalgia. Close readings of "Obituary," "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House," "Self-Portrait" and "A River" support the argument, together with a discussion of his translations and essays. The article concludes that Ramanujan models a form of resistance that is plural, self-critical and unwilling to purchase cultural authenticity at the price of simplification.

Keywords: A. K. Ramanujan; colonial memory; cultural resistance; translation; hybridity; Indian English poetry; postcolonial theory

1. Introduction

In the history of Indian English poetry, A. K. Ramanujan occupies a distinctive position. Alongside Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes and others, he belongs to the generation that matured after independence and sought to make English an Indian poetic medium (King, 1987; Parthasarathy, 1976). Yet his case differs from that of many contemporaries in the degree of his multilingualism and the depth of his scholarly involvement with the Indian literary past. He wrote poetry in English and Kannada, translated from Tamil and Kannada into English, studied folklore and linguistics, and taught for most of his career in Chicago (Dharwadker, 1999). This combination of locations and languages places the question of colonial legacy at the heart of his work, although he seldom addresses it directly.

Critics have generally approached Ramanujan through the themes of memory, family and the self. Chindhade (1996) emphasizes the intimate, ironic domestic register of the poems, while Patke (2006) situates him within a postcolonial poetics of translation and hybridity. What has received less sustained attention is the relation between these concerns and a politics of colonial memory. By colonial memory I mean the ways in which the experience and aftermath of British rule persist in individual and collective consciousness, not only as remembered events but as inherited institutions, languages, categories of knowledge and structures of feeling (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989). Colonial memory in this sense is rarely nostalgic or accusatory in Ramanujan. It is embedded in the objects and idioms of everyday life.

By cultural resistance I mean something broader than opposition to a political regime. Following the postcolonial tradition, I take the term to include practices by which colonized or formerly colonized peoples contest the cultural categories imposed on them, preserve or reinvent alternative traditions, and challenge the authority of dominant knowledge systems (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Resistance of this kind does not require the

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poet to be a nationalist or a polemicist. It can take the form of a stylistic choice, a translation project or an essay on how thinking occurs.

The article develops its argument in five steps. Section 2 outlines the theoretical background. Section 3 reads the family poems as acts of colonial memory. Section 4 examines translation as counter-colonial practice. Section 5 turns to the essays, and Section 6 to the poem "A River" as a critique of tradition itself. Section 7 considers the diasporic dimension, Section 8 raises objections, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework: Memory, Hybridity and the Colonial Archive

Three theoretical strands inform this reading. The first concerns memory. Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory is always social, formed within groups and frames of reference, while Nora (1989) distinguished living memory, carried in everyday practice, from history, the reconstructed and institutionalized account of the past. For the postcolonial writer, the distinction has particular force. Official history, whether colonial or nationalist, tends to organize the past into narratives of conquest, resistance and liberation. Living memory, by contrast, carries the unofficial residue: words, objects, rituals and family habits that bear the marks of colonial encounter without announcing them.

The second strand concerns colonial knowledge. Said (1978) showed that Orientalism produced the East as an object of European study, and subsequent work extended this insight to the Indian context. Cohn (1996) and Dirks (2001) demonstrated how colonial administration generated categories, from the census to caste classification, that reshaped the society they claimed merely to describe. Viswanathan (1989) argued that the teaching of English literature in India was itself an instrument of cultural governance, a way of forming subjects who would internalize the values of the rulers. A poet educated in English literature within this system, as Ramanujan was, inherits both the instrument and the question of what to do with it.

The third strand concerns responses to this inheritance. Bhabha (1994) proposed that colonial subjects do not merely accept or reject imposed culture but reproduce it with a difference, producing hybrid forms and ironic mimicry that unsettle the authority of the original. Nandy (1983) described the "intimate enemy," the way colonialism worked within the psyche of the colonized, and argued for forms of cultural recovery that did not simply invert colonial hierarchies. Chatterjee (1993) analysed how Indian nationalism claimed an "inner" domain of spiritual and cultural sovereignty even as it accepted the West's material and political frameworks. This last idea is important for Ramanujan, because his work both explores an inner domain of language and family and refuses to idealize it.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that resistance in a poet such as Ramanujan will not look like protest. It will look like an alternative way of remembering, an alternative way of translating, and a reluctance to accept either the colonial or the nationalist story at face value.

3. The House as Archive: Family, Language and Colonial Sediment

3.1 Colonial formation without colonial spectacle

Ramanujan was born in 1929 in Mysore, a princely state ruled by the Wodeyar dynasty under British paramountcy, and he was eighteen at independence. His family was Tamil-speaking, the city Kannada-speaking, and his education English-medium. His father was a mathematician and astronomer who also practised traditional astrology, a combination that already suggests the layered knowledge systems of the period (Dharwadker, 1999). The poet's childhood thus unfolded in a house where Tamil family life, Kannada surroundings, English schooling and older Sanskritic learning coexisted. Colonial memory in this setting is not the memory of confrontation but of coexistence and sedimentation.

This background explains why Ramanujan's poems rarely mention the Raj. What they register instead are the textures of a colonial modernity absorbed into private life: the English words in family speech, the bureaucratic paperwork of a respectable household, the lingering authority of institutions. Patke (2006) observes that Indian English poets of this generation tended to write the colonial past obliquely, through the language itself. In Ramanujan the obliqueness is a method. By declining the rhetoric of confrontation, the poems suggest that colonialism's deepest effects were not events but conditions.

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3.2 "Obituary" and the afterlife of institutions

The poem "Obituary" records the death of the speaker's father, and part of its power comes from what it chooses to emphasize. Instead of an elegiac portrait, it assembles the practical residue of a life: the things and obligations left behind, the rites that the son must perform, the strange mixture of the sacred and the administrative that surrounds a death in a modern Indian family (Ramanujan, 1995). The father's body is cremated according to ritual, yet the poem registers at the same time the paperwork and material remainders that belong to another order of life altogether.

This double register is a form of colonial memory. In the world of the poem, traditional rites and modern bureaucracy coexist without synthesis, and the son moves between them as someone fluent in both and fully at home in neither. The poem does not comment on this condition; it presents it. The irony arises from juxtaposition, which Bhabha (1994) would recognize as characteristic of the hybrid: forms that belong to different systems are placed side by side, each altering the meaning of the other. The father's death becomes a site where two inherited worlds, one ritual and one administrative, are both present and neither fully authoritative.

3.3 "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House": the house that keeps everything

"Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House" opens with the speculation that nothing which enters the house ever leaves (Ramanujan, 1995). The house becomes a figure for memory itself, an accumulating archive in which things, people and stories persist, return and interact. The family, in this image, is not a stable unit but a continuously reflected and refracted series of relations, in which the past is constantly present.

The poem has often been read as a celebration of the Indian joint family and its reflective structure of memory. It can equally be read as a poem about the nature of colonial memory. A house that retains everything is a house in which colonial inheritances, such as the English language and the habits of a westernizing elite, are retained alongside older things, without being sorted into authentic and inauthentic. Ramanujan does not purge the house of its borrowed elements. In Halbwachs's (1992) terms, family memory is not selective in the way official history is; it keeps the compromised and the mixed. The poem's resistance lies in this refusal to purify, a refusal that stands against both colonial claims that tradition had to be reformed and nationalist claims that it had to be cleansed of foreign influence.

3.4 "Self-Portrait": the double vision of the mimic

The brief poem "Self-Portrait" begins with the speaker's remark that he resembles everyone but himself, and goes on to describe seeing in shop windows the image of a stranger, apparently signed by his father (Ramanujan, 1995). The poem compresses a whole theory of inherited and distorted identity into a few lines. The self is found in reflections, in the eyes of others and in the signature of an earlier generation, and it never quite coincides with the person who looks.

This is a recognizable postcolonial predicament. Bhabha (1994) argued that the colonial subject is produced in the gap between sameness and difference: encouraged to resemble the colonizer, but never allowed to be identical. Ramanujan's poem transposes the structure into a more intimate key. The self is a likeness that does not quite fit, and the authorship of that likeness is partly the father's, which is to say partly the inheritance of a generation formed under colonial conditions. Yet the poem's tone is wry rather than anguished. The speaker's estrangement becomes the occasion for observation, and the mimic's failure to be a perfect copy turns into a kind of freedom. This is cultural resistance at the level of self-fashioning: a refusal to settle into either imitation or its opposite.

4. Translation as Counter-Colonial Practice

4.1 The Interior Landscape

Ramanujan's translations are not an adjunct to his poetry but its extension. *The Interior Landscape* (1967) presented the love poems of classical Tamil, composed in the early centuries of the common era, to an English-reading audience (Ramanujan, 1967). The title takes its cue from the Tamil poetic category *akam*, the "interior," which concerns love, in contrast to *puram*, the "exterior," which concerns war, kingship and public life. The book introduced readers to a poetic tradition that predated Sanskritic dominance in the south and followed its own conventions, in which landscapes correspond to

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emotional states with a rigour that has no direct parallel in Western pastoral.

The resistance in this project is subtle but real. Colonial scholarship had tended to treat Indian literature through the lens of Sanskrit and to present the Indian past as a single ancient civilization, readily summed up by philological authorities (Cohn, 1996; Viswanathan, 1989). Nationalist reaction often reproduced the same singular picture in celebratory form. By bringing forward the Tamil classical tradition, Ramanujan insisted on a plural past with distinct regional genealogies and their own aesthetic systems. He also resisted the colonial habit of translating Indian poetry into Victorian diction. His versions are spare, concrete and modern, and they make no attempt to dress the originals as exotic.

4.2 Speaking of Siva and the poetics of dissent

Speaking of Siva (1973) turned to a different tradition, the Kannada *vacanas* of the Virasaiva saints of the twelfth century, including Basavanna, Dasimayya, Mahadevi-yakka and Allama Prabhu (Ramanujan, 1973). These poems are short, colloquial, often startlingly direct, and frequently critical of temple ritual, caste hierarchy and priestly authority. Their authors came from various social backgrounds and wrote in the spoken language rather than in Sanskrit.

The selection is telling. Ramanujan, himself born into a Brahmin family, chose to translate a tradition that challenged Brahmanical orthodoxy. The act complicates easy accounts of cultural recovery. In Nandy's (1983) terms, it avoids the trap of simple inversion: rather than celebrating a monolithic "Indian tradition" against the colonial West, it recovers a tradition that was itself oppositional and internally plural. The Virasaiva poets resisted the authority of their own society's dominant culture, and in bringing them into English Ramanujan gave this internal dissent a place in the global conversation about India. Colonial and nationalist narratives alike had often presented Indian culture as hierarchical, timeless and spiritual. The vacanas present it as argumentative, historical and worldly.

4.3 Translation and the reversal of direction

It is worth noticing the direction of Ramanujan's translations. The colonial pattern was extraction: European scholars translated Indian texts into European languages for European audiences, and in doing so fixed their meanings (Said, 1978; Cohn, 1996). Ramanujan, an Indian scholar working in English, translated Indian texts into English not for imperial knowledge but for cultural presence. He also translated into English from Kannada the novel *Samskara* by U. R. Anantha Murthy, a critique of Brahmanical orthodoxy, and he gathered and retold Indian folktales (Ramanujan, 1991). The effect was to reverse the polarity of the colonial archive. The English language, once the instrument by which India was classified, became a medium by which Indian literatures could present themselves on their own terms and with their internal arguments intact.

This does not escape the paradox that translation into English still depends on the global dominance of English. Ramanujan was aware of the problem, and his careful, self-effacing translation notes betray an ethic of humility before the original. The paradox is part of what makes his practice a form of resistance rather than a mere inversion: it works within the inherited medium while altering its function.

5. The Essays: Context-Sensitivity and the Refusal of Universal Knowledge

Ramanujan's essays articulate, in analytical prose, the intellectual stance that his poems enact. The most influential is "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay" (1989), which proposes, with deliberate caution, that Indian thought and practice tend to be context-sensitive rather than context-free. Where a Western ethical or legal tradition often aspires to universal rules independent of circumstance, Ramanujan suggests, much Indian reasoning proceeds by attention to who, when and in what situation. He treats this not as an essence but as a tendency, hedged with qualifications, and he is explicit that generalization about "Indian" thinking is itself risky (Ramanujan, 1989a).

The essay can be read as a response to colonial epistemology. Colonial administrations generated universal categories, applied them to Indian society and treated deviations as disorder (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001). Ramanujan's argument undermines the presupposition that the universal is the rational and the contextual the confused. Characteristically, he presents the thesis with irony and qualification, which means that it resists becoming a new orthodoxy. A

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nationalist cultural essentialism could have turned his proposal into the claim that India is inherently different from the West. Ramanujan declines the move.

A companion essay, "Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections" (1989b), explores how Indian texts reflect on, quote and rework one another, so that originality in the Western Romantic sense matters less than the play of reflection. The essay's title echoes the house of mirrors in his poetry. It also bears on colonial memory. If texts exist in a web of reflections, then no tradition is pure and no memory has a single origin. This is a poetics of relation rather than purity, and it supports his resistance to the colonial demand for authentic originals and the nationalist demand for untainted ones.

The essay "Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (1991) extends the argument. Ramanujan surveys the many tellings of the Rama story across languages, religions and regions, and argues that no single version is the original and that each retelling is a reworking in conversation with others (Ramanujan, 1991; Richman, 1991). Colonial scholarship had often sought an original text from which later versions could be treated as corruptions. Ramanujan's essay opposes this model, and in doing so also contradicts any attempt to fix a single authoritative Ramayana for the nation. That later controversy over the essay's place in a university syllabus, widely reported in the early 2010s, suggests how persistently the plural vision of tradition can provoke those who prefer a unified one. It is also a reminder that cultural resistance as Ramanujan practised it was directed not only at colonial authority but at any monolithic account of culture.

6. Against Nativism: "A River" and the Critique of Tradition

An account of Ramanujan's resistance would be misleading if it presented him as a defender of indigenous tradition against a colonial intrusion. One of his best-known poems, "A River," turns its irony on the classical Tamil literary tradition he did so much to translate. The poem is set in Madurai, the city of temples and poets, where the river in summer shrinks to a thin trickle across a wide bed of sand. In the flood season it rises dramatically, and the poets compose their verses about the beauty of the flood. The poem then records what the poets omit: the destruction wrought by the water, including a drowned pregnant woman (Ramanujan, 1995).

The satire is double-edged. On one level it criticizes a certain aestheticism, the tendency of a venerable literary tradition to convert suffering into beauty and to attend to the conventional image rather than the actual event. On another, it implicates the poet-speaker himself, who is, after all, composing a poem about the poets. The poem thereby declines the stance of the outsider who judges tradition from a superior position. It also demonstrates that Ramanujan's recovery of Tamil poetry was never uncritical: he valued the tradition enough to hold it to account.

This matters for the argument about resistance. Chatterjee (1993) showed that nationalist thought often retreated into an "inner" domain of culture, imagined as spiritual, pure and unviolated by colonial power, and that this retreat could idealize tradition at the expense of those subordinated within it. "A River" resists this move. The poem keeps the memory of the drowned woman, a victim whom the inherited aesthetic would erase, and suggests that fidelity to the past requires attention to its omissions. This is a form of memory that opposes both colonial denigration of Indian tradition and nationalist idealization of it.

7. Memory from Elsewhere: Diaspora and Double Vision

Ramanujan spent the greater part of his adult life in the United States, teaching at the University of Chicago from the early 1960s. His diasporic location adds a further dimension to the question of colonial memory. Rushdie (1991) famously argued that the migrant writer constructs "imaginary homelands," fragmentary and reconstructed, because the original cannot be recovered. Ramanujan's later poems often take the form of memories seen from a distance, with the Mysore or Madras of childhood appearing through the lens of a Midwestern present.

This geographical situation intensifies the double vision already present in the earlier work. The colonial inheritance that shaped his education and the language of his poetry is encountered anew in a country that is itself a centre of global academic and cultural power. In the American university, Indian

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culture is an object of study, and the Orientalist structure of knowledge that Said (1978) described has been transformed rather than abolished. Ramanujan occupied a position within it, as a scholar of Indian languages and folklore who was also an Indian speaker of them. His work in this context can be seen as an attempt to ensure that the study of India remained answerable to Indian texts and Indian voices. His folklore collections and translations assembled a body of material that allowed American readers to meet Indian narratives without the mediation of earlier colonial interpretations (Ramanujan, 1991; Dharwadker, 1999).

The diasporic poems also reveal a distinctive ethic of memory. Having left, Ramanujan could not claim the innocence of the native informant, and having stayed connected to Indian languages, he could not claim the detachment of the cosmopolitan. The result is a stance of provisional belonging, which shapes both the sense of loss and the irony in his tone. Memory in these poems is not a recovered homeland but a continuing negotiation.

8. Limits and Objections

Several objections to this reading deserve acknowledgement. First, it could be argued that Ramanujan's comparative lack of explicit political engagement undermines any claim that his work is resistant. A more politicized reading would find his preference for irony and understatement a retreat from the public sphere. The reply is that resistance takes many forms and that, in a context where colonial and nationalist orthodoxies both claimed authority over cultural meaning, a refusal to adopt either idiom was itself a position. Nonetheless, the objection should be taken seriously, since his stance is available to those who would prefer cultural questions to be settled in the realm of the aesthetic.

Second, one might object that a Brahmin, English-educated, American-resident scholar speaks from a position of privilege and that his version of Indian plurality may overlook other voices. The point is well taken. Ramanujan's translation of the Virasaiva vacanas and his attention to folklore partially address it, since they bring non-elite voices into view, but his own mediation remains a mediation. Third, the claim that his thought is "context-sensitive" has been challenged by critics who regard generalizations about "Indian thinking" as risky, a risk that Ramanujan himself acknowledged. The article's argument does not depend on the truth of that generalization, only on its function as a challenge to colonial universalism.

Finally, there is the question of the extent to which his work should be called resistant at all, given its quiet and often affectionate tone. The term is best understood as marking a pattern of cultural choices rather than a posture of defiance. Where Ramanujan resists, he does so with the tools of a translator, an ironist and a scholar.

Conclusion

A. K. Ramanujan's poetry and prose, read together, offer a distinctive model of how a postcolonial writer might remember colonialism and resist its legacies. His colonial memory is domestic and linguistic rather than spectacular: it lives in the house that keeps everything, in the self that resembles everyone but itself, in the father's paperwork and the mother tongue's borrowed words. His resistance is equally unspectacular but consistent. It operates through translations that recover plural and often dissenting literary traditions, through essays that challenge the universalizing claims of colonial knowledge, and through a poetry of irony that will neither idealize the native past nor accept the colonizer's account of it.

Three implications follow. For the study of Indian English poetry, the argument suggests that the movement's turn to the personal and the ironic was not an evasion of history but a mode of historical engagement. For postcolonial theory, it shows that resistance can take the form of care for plurality, and that this can be as demanding as opposition. And for the study of translation, it suggests that the translator's work can be a political act when it alters the direction in which cultural knowledge travels.

There is also a lesson in the reception of Ramanujan's work. Its persistent capacity to provoke, to be claimed by competing causes and to be misread as either too Western or too Indian, indicates that the resistance it embodies, to singular accounts of tradition and to single stories of the past, remains unfinished. Further research might compare Ramanujan's strategies with those of other multilingual poets and translators, such as Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre, and might examine more closely his Kannada poetry, which this article,

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working from his English corpus, has necessarily left to one side.

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