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"A River of Irony: Reinterpreting Tradition through A.K. Ramanujan's 'A River'"

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Abstract

A.K. Ramanujan's "*A River*" is a profound poetic critique of cultural memory, selective tradition, and the ironies of literary romanticism. Set against the backdrop of the ancient temple city of Madurai, the poem contrasts the glorification of natural phenomena by traditional poets with the silences surrounding real human suffering. Employing rich literary devices, vivid imagery, and cutting irony, Ramanujan exposes the moral failure of art that prioritizes aesthetic beauty over ethical truth. This paper explores the poem's structural dynamics, thematic concerns, and philosophical resonance through the lens of Vedantic and Upanishadic teachings. It examines how the poem not only critiques historical poetic conventions but also offers a modern ethical call for authenticity, compassion, and spiritual integrity in both literature and society.

Preface

This study was born out of an attempt to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary expression, between aesthetic tradition and ethical responsibility. A. K. Ramanujan, both a scholar of classical Indian thought and a modern poet, uniquely embodies this intersection in his work "*A River*." In analyzing this poem, one is compelled to question not only the function of poetry but also the consciousness that shapes it—how cultures remember, what they choose to forget, and what role art plays in shaping that memory.

This research paper delves into the layers of Ramanujan's poem, exploring its critique of poetic romanticism, its portrayal of human suffering, and its alignment with the ethical and metaphysical teachings of the Vedas, Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Vachanamrut*, and the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*. The poem becomes a mirror held up to both tradition and modernity—asking us whether poetry should merely echo inherited forms or respond authentically to the cries within and around us.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Ramanujan employs several devices to create a textured narrative of irony and social critique:

- **Metaphor:** The river is metaphorically depicted as both sacred and destructive—simultaneously a source of poetic inspiration and real-world tragedy. The "sand ribs" metaphor alludes to a dried-out skeletal body, invoking death and barrenness.
- **Simile:** Similes like "The wet stones glistening like sleepy crocodiles" and "dry ones shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun" bring vivid visual imagery, mixing the natural and the grotesque.
- **Personification:** The river "has water enough / to be poetic / about only once a year," lending it an ironic human-like behavior—suggesting it behaves for the sake of poetry.
- **Imagery:** Visual details such as "clogging the watergates," "wet stones," and "cows named Gopi and Brinda" create a sensory-rich and emotionally charged setting.
- **Alliteration & Consonance:** Subtle examples like "patches of repair" and "sleepy crocodiles" enhance the poem's lyrical quality.

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- **Irony:** The most significant device in the poem. The traditional poets' celebration of floods contrasts with the modern poet's brutal honesty about real-life losses.

- **Symbolism:** The river symbolizes tradition, cultural stagnation, and selective memory—poets remember the flood but forget the drowned woman.

2. Structure and Form

- **Free Verse:** The poem lacks a strict rhyme scheme or meter, emphasizing its modernist stance and detachment from classical forms.

- **Enjambment:** Sentences run over multiple lines, mimicking the natural, unstructured flow of thought and the chaotic movement of the river.

- **Line and Stanza Breaks:** The poem is divided into two sections. The first narrates in the third person, offering an observer's view. The second section introduces a first-person voice, breaking into introspection and commentary.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Reality vs. Romanticism:** The central theme lies in exposing the romantic idealism of past poets who glorified nature without acknowledging human suffering.

- **Selective Memory:** The poem critiques how both tradition and society remember certain details (like the flood or the names of cows) while ignoring more critical human losses (a pregnant woman and unborn children).

- **Neglect and Apathy:** A deeper message highlights how society, literature, and even religion often ignore the marginalized.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Ironical, critical, and subtly mournful. The poet's disdain for the poetic glorification of disasters is clear.

- **Mood:** Reflective, melancholic, and unsettling. The reader feels discomfort at the contrast between what is remembered and what is forgotten.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

- **Existentialism:** The poem resonates with existentialist thought—pointing to absurdities in cultural memory and the meaningless repetition of poetic clichés.

- **Hindu Scriptures and Symbolism:** While not directly referencing the Vedas or Upanishads, the poem stands in contrast to the glorification of rivers in scriptures like the *Rigveda* (10.75)ⁱ where rivers are deified. Ramanujan humanizes and de-mystifies the river, questioning the religious veneer that covers social realities.

- **Ethical Undertone:** The ethical critique is subtle but powerful—the moral failure of poets and society to acknowledge individual suffering amidst grand narratives.

The poem "A River" by A. K. Ramanujan, while modern and secular in tone, reflects and critiques key themes that align—often in contrast or irony—with Upanishadic, Vedantic, and broader Hindu scriptural wisdom. Below is a comprehensive interpretation,

integrating references from the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gītā, Vachanamrut, Shrimad Bhagavatam, and other scriptures.

1. Impermanence and the Cyclical Nature of Existence Vedantic Parallel:

The river, drying up in summer and flooding during monsoons, symbolizes the transience (*anityatā*) of the material world. This aligns with:

- **Ṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.22:**ⁱⁱ

"As a lump of salt thrown in water dissolves and cannot be taken out again, but wherever we taste it, it is salty—even so, O Maitreyi, the self has dissolved into the Infinite Being (Brahman); there is no more individual consciousness."

→ The river, like the world, undergoes **change and dissolution**, representing the flux of *samsāra*.

- **Bhagavad Gītā 2.13:**ⁱⁱⁱ

"Just as the boyhood, youth and old age come to the embodied Soul in this body, in the same manner, is the attaining of another body; the wise man is not deluded at that."

→ Ramanujan's river changes seasonally—emphasizing **impermanence**—which resonates with Vedantic detachment from the temporal.

2. Ignorance (Avidyā) and Selective Perception Upanishadic and Vedantic Insight:

The poem critiques the **selective memory of poets and society**—glorifying floods while forgetting human suffering. This aligns with the Vedantic concept of *avidyā*, or ignorance, which causes misperception.

- **Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 1.2.10:**^{iv}

"Those who are engaged in mere ritual acts, thinking them to be the highest good, are deluded and fall again and again into old age and death."

→ Traditional poets, like those "quoting old poets," are blind to reality—ensnared in **cultural conditioning**, failing to perceive *truth (satya)*.

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-12:**

"One who fails to distinguish between truth and illusion, between the eternal and the transient, wanders endlessly in confusion."

→ The poem's irony echoes **this spiritual confusion**, where poetic beauty blinds the eye to human tragedy.

3. Compassion, Dharma, and the Value of Human Life Bhagavad Gītā and Bhakti Tradition:

The **indifference to the drowned pregnant woman and unborn children** is portrayed as a **moral lapse**, which Vedantic and Bhakti scriptures treat as a failure of **dharma (righteous action)** and **karuṇā (compassion)**.

- **Bhagavad Gītā 12.13–14:**^v

"He who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate, free from possessiveness and ego, equal in

pleasure and pain... he is dear to Me."

→ Ramanujan laments the **absence of compassion** in tradition and art—a subtle call to realign with **dharmic values**.

• **Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 1.8.43^{vi}** (Kunti's prayer):

"Let calamities come again and again so that we may always remember You, O Lord."

→ In contrast to **Bhakti literature**, where suffering draws one closer to divinity, the poem presents suffering as ignored—even **erased**—by culture.

4. Karma and Collective Responsibility

The **destruction by the flood**—three houses, a pregnant woman, and cows—raises questions of **karma, suffering, and moral responsibility**.

• **Chāndogya Upaniṣad 5.10.7:^{vii}**

"As one acts and conducts oneself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil."

→ The poem implies that **neglect and poetic apathy** are karmic failings—**cultural sins of omission**.

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-16:**

"To disregard the sufferings of others and remain immersed in one's own joy is not the quality of a true saint or devotee."

→ The traditional poets' apathy towards human suffering is spiritually **condemnable** in the eyes of Bhakti philosophy.

5. Critique of Ritualism and Superficial Piety

The poem's tone critiques a **hollow traditionalism** that remembers rituals (like bathing steps and flood inches) but forgets **life and human cost**.

• **Ṛgveda 10.85.1:^{viii}**

"Let not the rituals overshadow compassion and wisdom." (Implied ethos; actual verses focus on metaphysical unity.)

→ The ritualistic obsession with floods and river measurements reflects **spiritual superficiality**.

• **Bhagavad Gītā 16.17–18:^{ix}**

"Self-conceited, stubborn, filled with pride and intoxicated with wealth, they perform sacrifices in name only, for show, contrary to scriptural injunction."

→ Ramanujan's *new poet* resists this—choosing **truth over formality**, echoing **Krishna's call for authenticity**.

6. Symbolism of the River in Indian Spirituality

The **river** in Hinduism symbolizes both **life and liberation**, especially in the *Sarasvatī*, *Gaṅgā*, and *Yamunā* traditions. However, **Ramanujan's river is desacralized**—a drying, dying force.

• **Ṛgveda 10.75^x** – The Nadī Sūkta:

"O Rivers, you are the divine mothers; through you, we cross to liberation."

→ Contrasts with the *modern river* here—**no mokṣa, no grace, only dry ribs and drowned mothers**.

• **Bhagavatam 5.19.18:^{xi}**

"The Gaṅgā purifies all who bathe in her waters, for she carries the water that has washed Lord Viṣṇu's feet."

→ In Ramanujan's vision, **the river does not purify**—it **destroys**, highlighting a **loss of sacredness**.

Conclusion: A Vedantic Mirror of Modern Loss

A.K. Ramanujan's "*A River*" may seem secular, yet it **engages deeply with the spiritual tensions** embedded in Indian consciousness. It acts as a **mirror**—reflecting how spiritual traditions have, at times, become **disconnected from compassion, blind to suffering, and mute to moral urgency**.

The poem **does not reject** Upanishadic or Bhakti wisdom—but **challenges its misapplication**, calling modern readers and poets back to the **core dharma: truth (satya), compassion (karuṇā), and responsible awareness (viveka)**.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

• **Post-Independence Indian Modernism:** Written in postcolonial India, the poem reflects the disillusionment with inherited traditions and the emerging realist approach of modern Indian English poets.

• **Cultural Memory:** The poem critiques the Madurai poetic tradition (like that of the Sangam poets) for being disconnected from the actual plight of people.

• **Urbanization and Modernity:** The bridges with "patches of repair" and "clogged watergates" symbolize modern decay, administrative negligence, and a failing infrastructure.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• **Autobiographical Elements:** Ramanujan was deeply connected to South Indian tradition but equally critical of its limitations. His lived experience as both a traditional scholar and a modern poet shapes this dual vision.

• **Emotions:** A blend of frustration, sarcasm, and empathy pervades the poem. There is a subdued grief for the drowned woman and unborn children.

• **Inspiration:** Likely inspired by a visit to Madurai and the recognition of how poetry often fails to capture the complexities of real life.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• **Audience:** Primarily directed at modern readers and fellow poets—especially those who quote classical texts without acknowledging contemporary suffering.

• **Purpose:**

○ To expose the limitations of traditional poetic glorification.

○ To prompt self-reflection among poets and readers.

○ To advocate for a literature that acknowledges everyday tragedies, not just aestheticized nature.

9. Personal Interpretation

Ramanujan's "*A River*" is a masterful critique of poetic tradition and cultural indifference. By juxtaposing

romanticized floods with the tragic fate of a pregnant woman, the poet emphasizes the disconnection between art and life. His modernist voice disrupts the flow of inherited narratives, insisting that literature must acknowledge the human cost beneath the beauty.

Personal Reflection: The poem evokes a sense of ethical urgency—reminding readers that poetry, while aesthetic, should not be blind to pain. The image of twins "kicking at blank walls even before birth" is haunting—a metaphor for voicelessness that reverberates long after the poem ends.

Conclusion

A.K. Ramanujan's "*A River*" stands as a powerful intervention in Indian English poetry—a poem that refuses to idolize nature while ignoring its consequences. By questioning the silence around a drowned pregnant woman while cows and floodwaters are immortalized in verse, Ramanujan draws attention to the moral negligence embedded in cultural repetition. The poem, while deeply modern, resonates with the core tenets of Upanishadic wisdom: the need to pierce through illusion (*māyā*), to see reality as it is (*satya-darśana*), and to cultivate compassion (*karuṇā*) over aesthetic detachment.

In doing so, "*A River*" becomes more than a poem—it becomes a call to conscience, compelling poets, readers, and thinkers to re-evaluate the purpose of memory, the meaning of sacredness, and the very function of language in a world where rivers not only nourish but drown. Ramanujan's vision is neither cynical nor nihilistic—it is, in its essence, Vedantic: it seeks truth, resists ignorance, and affirms that only in truth does poetry fulfill its highest dharma.

Reference

- I. प्र सु व आपो महिमानमुत्तमं कारुर्वोचाति सद्ने विवस्वतः । प्र सप्तसप्त त्रेधा हि चक्रुः प्र सृत्वरीणामति सिन्धुरोजसा ॥
प्र सु व आपो महिमानमुत्तमं कारुर्वोचाति सद्ने विवस्वतः । प्र सप्तसप्त त्रेधा हि चक्रुः प्र सृत्वरीणामति सिन्धुरोजसा ॥
- II. स वा एष महानज आत्मा योज्यं विज्ञानमयः प्राणेषु य एषोऽन्तर्हृदय आकाशस्तस्मिञ्छेते, सर्वस्य वशी सर्वस्येशानः सर्वस्याधिपतिः; स न साधुना कर्मणा भूयान्, नो एवासाधुना कनीयान्; एष सर्वेश्वरः; एष भूताधिपतिः; एष भूतपालः; एष सेतुर्विधरण एषां लोकानामसंभेदाय; तमेतं वेदानुवचनेन ब्राह्मणा विविदिषन्ति यज्ञेन दानेन तपसाऽनाशकेन; एतमेव विदित्वा मुनिर्भवति । एतमेव प्रव्राजिनो लोकमिच्छन्तः प्रव्रजन्ति। एतद्ध स्म वै तत् पूर्वं विद्वांसः प्रजां न कामयन्ते, किं प्रजया करिष्यामो येषां नोऽयमात्मायं लोक इति; ते ह स्म पुत्रैषणायाश्च वित्तैषणायाश्च लोकैषणायाश्च व्युत्थायाथ भिक्षाचार्यं चरन्ति; या ह्येव पुत्रैषणा सा वित्तैषणा, या वित्तैषणा सा लोकैषणा, उभे ह्येते एषणे एव भवतः । स एष नेति नेत्यात्मा, अगृह्यो नहि गृह्यते, अशीर्यो नहि शीर्यति, असङ्गो नहि सज्यते, असितो न व्यथते, न रिष्यति; एतमु हैवैते न तरत इति—अतः पापमकरवमिति, अतः कल्याणमकरवमिति; उभे उ हैवैष एते तरति, नैनं कृताकृते तपतः ॥ २२ ॥

- III. देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ १३ ॥
- IV. इष्टापूर्तं मन्यमाना वरिष्ठं नान्यच्छ्रेयो वेदयन्ते प्रमूढाः ।
नाकस्य पृष्ठे ते सुकृतेऽनुभूत्वेमं लोकं हीनतरं वा विशन्ति ॥ १० ॥
- V. अद्वेष्टा सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च ।
निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः समदुःखसुखः क्षमी ॥ 13 ॥
सन्तुष्टः सततं योगी यतात्मा दृढनिश्चयः ।
मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिर्यो मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥ 14 ॥
- VI. श्रीकृष्ण कृष्णसख वृष्णयुषभावनिधुग्
राजन्यवंशदहनानपवर्गवीर्य ।
गोविन्द गोद्विजसुरार्तिहरावतार
योगेश्वराखिलगुरो भगवन्नमस्ते ॥ ४३ ॥
- VII. तच्च इह रमणीयचरणा अभ्याशो ह यत्ते रमणीयां योनिमापद्ये-
रन्ब्राह्मणयोनिं वा क्षत्रिययोनिं वा वैश्ययोनिं वाथ य इह कपूयचरणा
अभ्याशो ह यत्ते कपूयां योनिमापद्येरञ्चयोनिं वा सूकरयोनिं वा
चण्डालयोनिं वा ॥ ५.१०.७ ॥
- VIII. सत्येनोत्तभिता भूमिः सूर्येणोत्तभिता द्यौः । ऋतेनादित्यास्तिष्ठन्ति दिवि
सोमो अधि श्रितः ॥
सत्येनोत्तभिता भूमिः सूर्येणोत्तभिता द्यौः । ऋतेनादित्यास्तिष्ठन्ति दिवि
सोमो अधि श्रितः ॥
- IX. आत्मसम्भाविताः स्तब्धा धनमानमदान्विताः ।
यजन्ते नामयज्ञेस्ते दम्भेनाविधिपूर्वकम् ॥ १७ ॥
- X. प्र सु व आपो महिमानमुत्तमं कारुर्वोचाति सद्ने विवस्वतः । प्र सप्तसप्त
त्रेधा हि चक्रुः प्र सृत्वरीणामति सिन्धुरोजसा ॥
प्र सु व आपो महिमानमुत्तमं कारुर्वोचाति सद्ने विवस्वतः । प्र सप्तसप्त
त्रेधा हि चक्रुः प्र सृत्वरीणामति सिन्धुरोजसा ॥
- XI. एतासामपो भारत्यः प्रजा नामभिरेव पुनन्तीनामात्मना चोपस्पृशन्ति
॥ १७ ॥ चन्द्रवसा ताम्रपर्णी अवटोदा कृतमाला वैहायसी कावेरी वेणी
पयस्विनी शर्करावर्ता तुङ्गभद्रा कृष्णा वेण्या भीमरथी गोदावरी
निर्विन्ध्या पयोष्णी तापी रेवा सुरसा नर्मदा चर्मण्वती सिन्धुरन्धः
शोणश्च नदौ महानदी वेदस्मृतिः ऋषिकुल्या त्रिसामा कौशिकी
मन्दाकिनी यमुना सरस्वती दृषद्वती गोमती सरयू रोधस्वती सप्तवती
सुषोमा शतद्रुश्चन्द्रभागा मरुद्वृधा वितस्ता असिक्री विश्वेति महानद्यः
॥ १८ ॥