

CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF A RIVER

A.K. Ramanujan was a translator and poet, born in Mysore. He is also known as the greatest modern poet of India. In spite of a Western University Education, he remained inherently Indian at heart. He contributed richly to Indian aesthetics and folklore. He was concerned about the decline of Tamil poetry. Moreover he had genuine kindness toward the underdog, the poor and toward women. This article provides a complete analysis of the poem a river by A.K.Ramanujan.

In his poem A River, the narrator talks of the river Vaikai flowing through the ancient city of Madurai. Madurai has been sketched by the narrator who is visiting, as

‘A city of temples and poets’

This is an ironic reference to Madurai as a seat of Tamilian culture, which according to him is in a state of decadence. He observes that the poets, past and present only speak of the river during the rains and floods. A description follows, of the river in summer.

The Poem ‘A River’ by A.K.Ramanujan

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
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
The poets only sang of the floods.

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.
The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.
He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different coloured diapers
to tell them apart.

| – A K Ramanujan

Analysis of a River by A.K.Ramanujan

It turns to a dry trickle, uncovering 'sand ribs'. He details the underbelly of the river that stays hidden. Visible now, are the bits of straw and women's hair that chokes the rusty gates of the dam and the bridges that are plastered over with 'patches of repair'.

The narrator remarks wryly that the poets who sang and they, who now imitate them, see only the symbolism of vitality when the river is in flood. With a few stark images, the poet completes the picture of the river and its complexities which have been glossed over and ignored. Yet not to stress the merely the grim, unlovely angle, the poet brings alive the beauty too, which lies open in the summer. This has been lost on the sensibilities of the past poets:

the wet stones glistening like sleepy

crocodiles, the dry ones

shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.... (13-15)

Using vivid similes, he refers to a lack of imagination of the old poets who 'only sang of the floods'.

In stanza two, the poet speaks of the river in flood in the rains. He was there once and saw what happened. The river in spate destroys everything in its wake from live-stock to houses to human life. This happens once a year and has been continuing for years in the same pattern.

He notes the casual approach of the of the towns people. Anxiously they talk of the rising level of water and enumerate mechanically the 'precise' number of steps as the water brims over the bathing places.

The river carries off:

'three village houses,

one pregnant woman

and a couple of cows

named Gopi and Brinda as usual.'

These are itemized, mentioned cursorily as in a list—three, one, two. The early poets and their successors tick off the losses as mere statistics, unheeding of the destruction, suffering and human pain left in the wake of the flood. Their aim, according to the speaker, is simply to record a sensational event to arrest the momentary attention of the people. He finds this

attitude shocking and callous.

Between the village houses and Gopi and Brinda, the two cows is remarked one pregnant woman. No one knows what her name is and she is glossed over peremptorily. Yet the poet imagines that she may have drowned with not one life in her but two—‘twins in her’ which kicked at blank walls even before birth.

Continuing with the analysis of a river by Ramanujan, the poets deemed it enough to versify and exalt the river only when it flooded once a year. While they sang of the river as a creative force giving birth to new life, the paradox of the pregnant woman who drowned with twins in her eludes them. Embracing only the glory of the floods, they fail to realize its more complex repercussions on human life. The narrator gives us a more complete impression of the river as destroyer as well as preserver. He is sarcastic about the poets of yore who seize only the floods to write about and that too merely once a year.

‘the river has water enough

to be poetic

about only once a year’

Theme of the poem A River by Ramanujan

The above lines satirize and debunk the traditional romantic view of the river Vaikai in Madurai, by the ancient poets. He is derisive too, of the new poets who have no wit but to blindly copy their predecessors.

Humor is presented in the names of the cows and the coloured diapers of the twins to help tell them apart. Yet this too, is an attack on the orthodoxy of Hinduism. While cows are given names, no one knows who the pregnant woman is nor are they concerned. Human sacrifices were performed to appease the gods because of droughts in Tamil Nadu, and the drowned twin babies may be a reference to such cruel and orthodox rituals.

This is an unusual poem with many layers of meaning and is a commentary on the indifference of the old and modern poets to the ravages caused by the river in flood and the pain and suffering caused to humans.

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