Ramanujan’s Poem A River Analysis

Ramanujan’s poetry expresses an Indian sensibility sharpened and conditioned by Western education. He shot into prominence with the publication of his first volume of verses The Striders. The poem ‘A River‘ was published in 1966. There is an organic relation between Ramanujan’s images and his family as is evident in his poetry. The river celebrated in the poem is the Vaigai which flows through the heart of Madurai. The poem is about truth, the reality of the river and the kind of relationship between the present and the past. In Madurai, the poets of the past sang of the city, its temples, and of the river as full.

“A River” is a poem on the Vaigai which flows through Madurai, a city that has for about two thousand years been the seat of Tamil culture. As an evocation of a river, the poem succeeds admirably. At the same time the river becomes a point of departure for ironically contrasting the relative attitudes of the old and new Tamil poets both of whom are exposed for their callousness to suffering, as a result of the floods.

Every summer the river dries to a trickle and the poets sang only of the floods. When there are floods, they are in fact destructive, causing deaths and damages to property. But the present day poets of Tamil still echo the old poets and ignore reality. It is seen to be a satire on sensation loving poets who write only on events which excite them, such as floods, unmindful of the havoc and suffering which they cause.

According to Verghese,

“The poet’s essentially Indian sensibility has been heightened, sharpened and conditioned by his Western education and by his contacts with Western culture.”

This sharpened sensibility is fully expressed by the present poem. In Madurai, the city of temples and poets who always sang of cities and temples (not of human beings), flows the river called Vaigai which dries in every summer, baring the sand-ribs, straw and women’s hair clogging the water gates, with the wet stones sparkling like sleepy crocodiles, the water buffaloes lounging in the sun. But no one sang of the river that dried. The poet sings only of the floods. The dry river is then contrasted with the river in flood which carried of three village houses, one pregnant woman and a couple of cows named Gopi and Brinda as usual. The poets still sang, but followed the old tradition of old poets and sang only of floods.

Ramanujan thus satirizes the absence of human concern in these poets:

“but no one spoken

in verse

of the pregnant woman

drowned with perhaps twins in her

kicking at blank walls

even before birth”

The height of irony is reached when Ramanujan refers to the comment of one who was there for a day when they had the floods He notices that the river has water enough to be poetic about only once a year. But then in the first half hour, it carries away quite a few things including pregnant woman expecting identical twins with no moles on their bodies, with different coloured diapers to tell them apart.

The poet’s tone is casual and detached. His irony is pungent and the structure is based on the balance of opposites which heighten the irony of the whole poem, which is remarkable for its vivid, visual imagery:

“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”

This cameo-like picture reveals not only an eye for minutest details, but an ability to communicate such details with photographic exactness. Telling use of repetition has been made in lines like the following:

“City of temples and poets

Who sang of cities and temples”

In Ramanujan’s poetry, imagery is the most important vehicle of communication. Thus the image of:

“straw and women’s hair

clogging the water gates

at the rusty bars…”

brings to the forefront not only the total dryness of the river, but also the emotional and spiritual sterility of poets, who seek only poetic subjects and are entirely indifferent to the fact of human suffering.

Ramanujan wants to convey that the poets could do nothing practical or effective to prevent people’s misery resulting from the floods in the river. The poets could only write poems on the subject of floods, but could not render any aid to the afflicted people. The flood sweeps away three village houses, one pregnant woman and a couple of cows, just as it used to do in the past.

The tragedy is repeated every time the river becomes flooded. The cows have been named- Gopi and Brinda- to impart another realistic touch to the picture. No one writes of the pregnant woman drowned with perhaps twins in her. Ramanujan’s poem is in part an answer to such “poetic myth making.”