

The Seven-Eighth of the Iceberg: Oblique Expression in the Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan

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Abstract

Imagination emerges from a more profound source than intellect, and so does poetry than prose. A poem is a symbolic account written in such a language and form that the surface meaning is just a small portion of the whole or oblique meaning. It generally has condensed language yet deeper layers of meaning. Though the mode of expression is the concrete language, it spring out from inexplicable sources concealed beneath layers of the rational mind. Poetry, therefore, is a manifestation of the conflict of the poet's personal vision with the external world, which has more meaning hidden below the visible than on the surface. Thus, this obliqueness of expression or implicitness of meaning in poetry is associated to an iceberg that has only ten per cent of the mass visible above water, whereas the rest of the ninety per cent remains submerged below. But it is the hidden larger part that is affected by the ocean currents and that decides the behavior of the iceberg at the tip. This paper attempts to analyze the Iceberg Technique used by A. K. Ramanujan in his poetic expression.

Keywords: Iceberg technique, oblique expression, vakrokti

The iceberg symbol can very aptly be put side by side to the theory of the subconscious propounded by Sigmund Freud as just a little part of a human being's consciousness is "visible" on the surface, whereas the subconscious continues to be hidden under the layers of consciousness in the mind and reveals itself only in glimpses. Ernest Hemingway noted,

"An iceberg floats in the Arctic with only one-eighth of its mass above water while the greater, more potentially devastating portion hides beneath the surface and attracts our concern precisely because it is hidden. In the same way, he reasoned, the drama of a story can attract our concern if we are allowed to glimpse only a fragment of visible

action that implies an earlier, unseen experience of far greater magnitude and emotional significance.”¹

In the poetic text of Ramanujan, only a miniature of the whole meaning is visible to the eyes on the surface, while the reader correlates the text to the socio-cultural milieu in context and deciphers the deep-rooted connotation of the text. The subtext lying below the surface prompts us to read between the lines and investigate for the small cues and codes that reveal the entire picture of the meaning. The reader requires the conscientiousness to understand, not just what the poet intends to say, but also what he avoids telling directly. Hidden layers of patterns are imperative to be recognized because no event or emotional reaction is an isolated occurrence. The deep rooted links and hints like the various layers of an iceberg help the reader in understanding the underlying structure or root causes that generate those thoughts in the poet’s mind. The hypotheses and socio-cultural factors that have shaped the poetic creation are situated at the bottom of the iceberg.

The cues, symbols and images that the Ramanujan employs strike at the profundities that are not sensed at the surface of the text. The simplicity of the words that Ramanujan uses is highly suggestive and connotative. There is always a strong undercurrent of meanings, more of objective nature, that suggest a lot about the poet’s conflict of existence between two lands.

Ramanujan, a scrupulous linguist, wrote poems which were intended to elucidate life in profound sense. To accomplish his mission, he exploits the oblique manner of expression in his poetic art. The iceberg pattern that occurs in his work is a result of this. A man of unusual sensibility, Ramanujan expresses this emotional response always in obliquity, and renders the reader scrupulously engrossed in exploring the deeper layers of meaning in his work. Whenever a poet tries to suggest higher sensibility or something further than simple descriptions of infatuations or human exploits, the poetry is bound to attain obliquity or vakrokti as per Indian Poetics. The presence of ‘Vakrokti’ or oblique expression leads to the image of iceberg in poetry, where it is not ‘what is said through words’, which tell the whole meaning, but ‘what is hidden below the surface and beyond the words’ bears the true poetic essence.

“Elements of Composition” is a unique expression for the relation of body and nature. Based on the scientific analysis of human body the poet brings into focus how the composition and decomposition of the human elements takes place –

- Composed as I am, like others,
of elements n certain well known lists,
father’s seed and mother’s egg ⁱⁱ

The poet suggests two images parallel to each other: the nature within the human body; its genealogical references and the nature outside the human body. Not only these constituents from father and mother, he also goes on discussing the natural elements like earth, air, water and fire that give existence to a human body. Here, the surface meaning or the tip of the iceberg shows the perishable nature of the human body, and its oneness with the ultimate elements of nature, whereas the deeper structure takes the reader to the sentimental and intellectual roots of the poet grown deep into the soil of Indian mythology, that believes in the composition of the human body of the five elements of nature: shitij, jal, paavak, gagan, sameer (earth, water, fire, sky and air). Furthermore the vakrokti or obliqueness is imbibed in the expression when the poet brings-in the association of the organic and inorganic elements in the composition of the human body. The anatomical reference to the scientific terms and inorganic elements of composition like ‘calcium’, ‘carbon’, ‘gold’ and ‘magnesium’ presents a deeper image of the poet’s association with the ancient and the modern; with spirituality and science, thus imparting a more intellectual and rational tone to the poem.

‘The Striders’, ‘Saturdays’ and ‘Death and Good Citizen’ further establish the mechanical nature of the human body that ultimately is an integrated, inseparable element of nature. The thin stemmed water bugs with their dry capillary legs are compared to the prophets who are said to have attained the power to walk on water. The obliqueness of expression here denotes the sarcastic tone that the poet employs to compare the capability of the bugs to walk on water like the prophets. ‘Death and Good Citizen’ brings forth an oblique expression of “the dismantlement and destruction of human body”ⁱⁱⁱ the body with the dismantling or the decomposing process proves highly synthetic and associative for varied cultures of the world. Ramanujan uses the expression “my tribe” in a sarcastic tone and goes further saying:

- ...incarnate

unbelievers in bodies,
they'll speak proverbs, contest
my will, against such degradation.
Hidebound, even worms cannot
have me: they'll cremate
me in Sanskrit and sandalwood...^{iv}

This again is an apt example of the iceberg quality of text. It is not just about the various rituals of destruction of the body after death across the world. There is much more than the apparent meaning hidden below the surface, under this oblique expression. A close scrutiny reveals the poet's tacit belief that the body should be buried so that it gets mixed with the nature and is decomposed naturally. The perplexity of the poet lies not in the idea of death, it rather lies in his disconnection and dissociation from the elements of nature, for it will deprive him as a natural entity to become a part of nature:

- my tissue will never graft
will never know newsprint,
never grow in a culture
or be mould and compost
for jasmine, eggplant^v

Ramanujan regards history as myth. He does not approve of the meaning of memory simply as a stockroom for the old experiences that no more exist, or for the times past. For him, man lives half in the past and half in present. He lives in both the times simultaneously. Our memory represents the existence of our past in the present life. In 'On Memory' he finds an appropriate use of memory for revealing the pulse of time and what also becomes the pulse of human body:

- Memory
in a crowd of memories, seems
to have no place
at all for unforgettable things.^{vi}

In his interview with Rama Jha, Ramanujan himself authenticates the idea that our life is not a reality separated in times past and present, and that there are events that are re-lived and re-experienced by us in a cyclic form:

“Because you cannot entirely live in the past, neither can you entirely live in the present, because we are not like that. The past never passes. Either the individual past or historical past or cultural past, it is with us, it is what gives us the richness of – what you call it – the richness of understanding, the richness of expression.”^{vii}

This idea very well draws the iceberg theory wherein the present life is always followed by the past experiences, incidents, socio-cultural-political impacts on the sub-conscious mind. This is in line with Freud’s view of the human mind, which he calls the Mental Iceberg

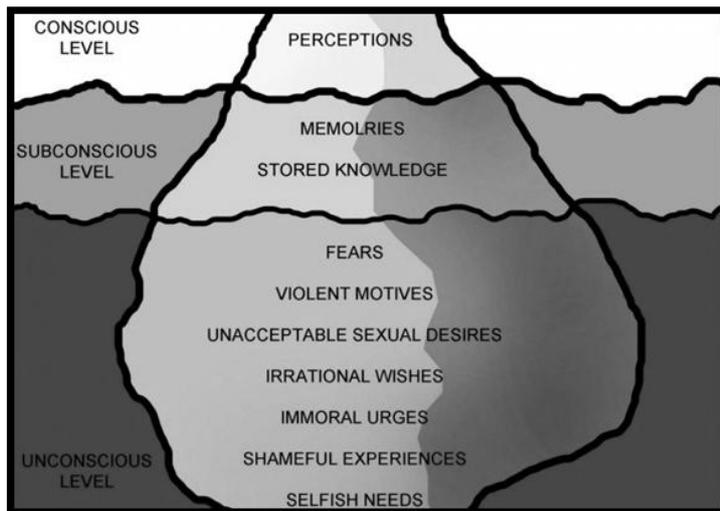


Figure: Freud’s View of the Human Mind

‘Time and Time again’ presents another motif of iceberg though the oblique images and expressions of “Clock Tower” and “beating of their gongs” that workout the inner realities of human body. The outer perception and inner realization are fused together in the image of clock. As a mechanical clock continues incessantly with its arms, so does the inner clock of human body, that exploits the life giving cells and gradually deteriorates them. Furthermore, the poem reveals the active operation of nature and its relation through human body.

- through the knocked-out clockwork, after a riot,
a peace-march time bomb, or a precise act
of nature in a night of lightnings.^{viii}

The similar notion of time has been brought up again in ‘Fog’. Here, the imagery of fog symbolically relates human life with “oxen and oil press” - a typical Indian usage. Further the image of fog is associated with the moving wheel of time and with the nature of human body:

- Waiting for change, the body
changes, a chrysalis

that will rot unless it breaks
into wings.^{ix}

Towards the end, the poem becomes more suggestive and produces sensations in human body and mind when the outward ticking of the clock reveals the historical self of the poet and also becomes suggestive of the psychological time:

- a cold that burns without blisters,
pulse ticking off time like
an umpire over a fallen wrestler.^x

In 'August', the poet counts the months of an English calendar, and shows the cyclic process of time, but in 'Birthdays' he brings forth a comparative chart of life and death. The inclusion of nature vis-à-vis the wheel of time becomes a striking point to the reader for time-linearity. The birthdays of his own family are linked with the "tamarind trees." The personal tone of the poem gets generalized and is associated to history, when the poet speaks of the birthdays of St. Francis, Shakespeare, Gandhi and Washington. Birth symbolizes the growth of leaves on the tree while death becomes indicative of a dry tree facing the danger of a storm. The ceremony of birth is regarded as a specific event, but the poet makes it mysterious when he leaves the context with a question mark:

- but death? Is it a dispersal
of gathered energies
back into their elements,
earth, air, water, and fire,
a reworking into other moulds,
grass, worm, bacterial glow
lights, and mother-matter
for other off-spring with names
and forms clocked into seasons?^{xi}

The symbol of house in "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House" presents multifaceted values of Hinduism. On the one hand it talks about an important tenet of Hinduism that humanity is one family, and Ramnujan is fascinated by the ideals of Hinduism and has presented the manifold facets of it, but on the other hand he has acknowledged that, some traditions in it have outlived their utility, and now they have only a sentimental value.

He has mixed humour and irony while presenting the tragic death of the family member in a far corner of the world:

- once in nineteen-forty-three
from as far away as the Sahara,
half-gnawed by desert foxes,
and lately from somewhere
in the north, a nephew with stripes
on his shoulder was called
an incident on the border
and was brought back in plane
and train and military truck
even before the telegrams reached,
on a perfectly good
chatty afternoon.^{xii}

Ramanujan was an ardent observer and critic of socio-political undertakings, and presented the predatory dealings of politicians. In his poem 'An Image for Politics' the images of cannibals and squirming worms elicit the tactics of some politicians who have no reservations in eliminating the rivals from their path through any possible means, for the accomplishments of their despicable games without any consideration for the interests of the masses. Ramanujan is against accepting the socio-political systems, which negate the human morals, and prefers to follow the values enshrined in the civilizations of the world:

- cannibal
devouring smaller cannibal
till only two equal
giants are left to struggle,
entwined,
like wrestlers on a cliff:
and at last
only One
omnipotent
maggot-cesar who rent

his rival
and lived-
of all the mob and the triumvirate,
his fat and lonely body stiff
and blind with meat^{xiii}

One of the most quintessential examples of iceberg technique is presented in ‘Highway Stripper’. It is one of the few poems that have a propensity to wander off the psyche of the reader from the real message through remarkable use of imagery. On the surface, after a superficial reading, the erotic metaphors and cues lead the readers to comprehend the text as a licentious wordplay. One is not likely to easily recognize the spiritual connotation implied here, the one related to Bhakti. The entire poem, except the last two verses, is easy to follow, where Ramanujan articulates his experience when he was once passing through a highway behind a Mustang, and out of the blue he saw lots of pieces of female clothing being thrown out of the window one by one. There is intense imagery suggestive of femininity, with use of words like slip, bra and panties. In striking contrast here are terms like dusty, blue, Mustang, speeding etc. that are inherent symbols of masculinity. These two brass-tacks of a woman’s sexuality and a man’s vigor are juxtaposed to create two very different erotic scenes, which blend in together and are yet in complete contrast to one another. When he overtakes the car in which the stripper sits, he is shocked to see only a man behind the wheel, a spectacled man, aged around forty, listening to a football radio channel. The last verse contains the deeper seven eighth of the iceberg:

- or was it me
moulting, shedding
vestiges,
old investments,
rushing forever
towards a perfect
coupling
with naked nothing
in a world
without places?^{xiv}

In the deeper sense of the poem, Ramanujan illustrates an insight to a tenet of Bhakti, called nirguna: a state of such devotion to God where the devotee surrenders his identity to become a part of his God and unites with him. One has to understand that to attain nirguna, a person ceases to have any material form. There is no physical being, just a unity with God. The highway stripper is unexpectedly portrayed as spiritual rather than sexual. In just two lines, the entire focus shifts to the spiritual being.

Another image created here is that of Ardhnarishwar, a fusion of Shiva and Parvati. Ardhnarishwar is a motif of entirety that results after the merger of the male and the female. It is a concept that underlines the presence of the spiritual elements of both the genders in every person. Attaining a balance between the male and the female facets of the mind, a person reaches the state of entirety thus transcending the corporal existence and attaining nirguna. Ramanujan further elucidates this in the last stanza, where he asks if it was him who was shedding his old beliefs, and was striving for a perfect coupling of the male and the female inside himself, with naked nothing, with his God, in a world without places, in a place where only spiritual being dominates and not physical. Ramanujan moved to the US when he was 30, and lived there till his death. Lots of his works feature the lack of trans-cultural attitude in a supposedly globalized world, based on his own experiences in the US. Another point here is that Ramanujan was an avid believer in Bhakti and its concepts, and also translated many verses, which pertained to the movement. These two concepts play a significant role in this poem as well.

Ramanujan's poems are deep rooted in his experiences of the years spent in his homeland India. The influence of a religious family where he spent his formative childhood years has endowed him with a rich system that helps him understand the meaning of life in a wider perspective. He has preserved his faith in the Hindu philosophy of the Unity Consciousness. His recognition of the oneness of all life is manifested in his poem 'Christmas':

For a moment, I no
Longer know
Leaf from parrot
Or branch from root
nor, for that matter
that tree

from you or me.^{xv}

The poem further emphasizes the dissimilarity between the oriental and occidental traditions through the tree image in the same poem. The two different cultures are brought to his mind by the juxtaposition of the two images of the bare leafless tree standing outside his window in the USA and the lively tree seen out of his window in India which is more than a mere “stiff geometrical shape”.

The above examples elucidate how proficiently ramanujan’s poems speak even the unspoken. It would rather be more apt here, to say that, Ramanujan’s poems carry the entire socio-cultural and historical traces as their roots, which need to be carefully excavated and exhumed to decipher the hidden seven-eighth of the iceberg.

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