

A River

A.K. Ramanujam

The Poet :

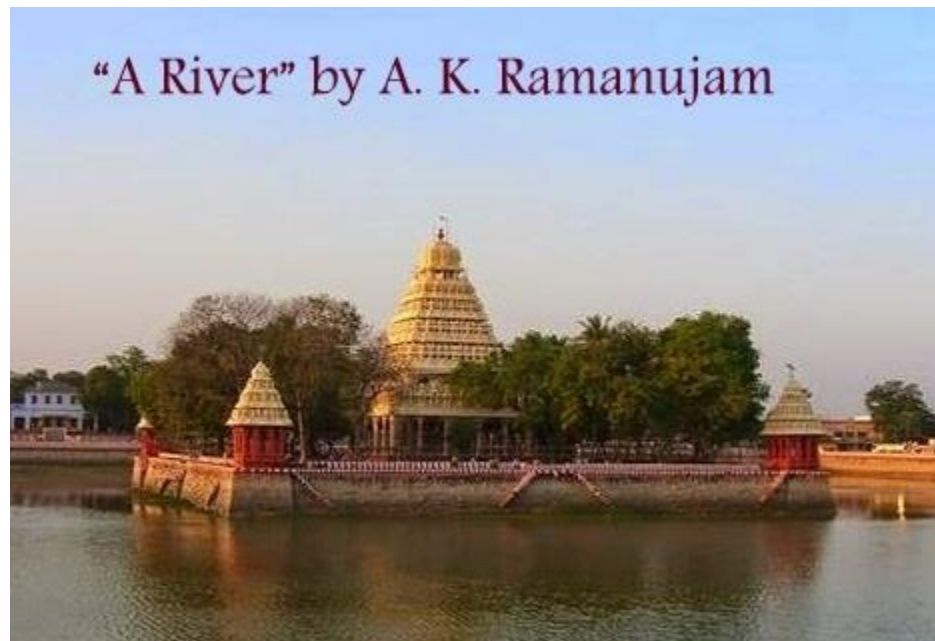
A native of Mysore, India, Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan grew up during the latter part of English rule in India, exposing him to the languages that would form his life's work as a poet and translator. Ramanujan's work reveals that cultural tradition in India is a conflict between the colonial English identity of the country as well as its historic and post-colonial ethnic identities. His work, a mixture of the complex languages of which he was a master, is a production of flowing, metaphoric syntax and extremely concentrated composition.

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.



Key Points:

- This poem is a critique of the poets praising only the glory of the river
 - Ramanujan presents what the other poets failed to do
 - Poets, both ancient and modern simply glorified the river
 - Ramanujan says that their claims may be true only once in a year
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- Flooding of river is not only a sign of prosperity but also a cover for the fatal consequences of the same
 - Flood is capable of bringing adversity at times
 - Summer takes away the charm of the river
 - The symbol of cow and buffalo is effectively used
 - He presents identical twins [cows]. They signify the old and new poets who glorified the river

Sand Ribs



at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them



Rust formation. Rust is formed
When iron material is not maintained.
Rust is the formation of brown layer in
The iron. When any iron object is not in use
for long time rust is formed

Under the bridges the iron bars gained rust. And the bridge required
Repair in some parts. The bridge was used less because there was no water

**the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles**



The wet stones are shining like sleeping crocodiles

**the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun**



Buffalo lounging in the sun.
Lounging-wandering-moving from
Here and there

The dry stones look like the buffalo

In the first stanza, the speaker begins by setting the scene. He is going to be describing how the city of “Madurai” is described by poets. It is a place that is made up of “temples and poets” and these poets have always sung of the same things. Every summer in the city the river basin is emptied. The river “dries to a trickle” and the sand is bared. The shapes and objects that

are revealed are dark and somewhat ominous. They are “sand ribs” and “straw and women’s hair”. These things clog up the “watergates,” made of rusty bars.

The second stanza of ‘A River’ is only eleven lines. The “He” in the first line is a reference to a poet, perhaps the speaker himself. He states that he was only in the city for “a day”. It is in this stanza that a number of the more complicated and personal details are revealed. The details were not hidden, they were easily learned by the poet featured in this stanza.

Everywhere the people spoke about the flood and the terrible things which resulted. It is not just a simple natural occurrence. It “carried off three village houses” as well as a pregnant woman and “a couple of cows”. The cows have names, making these lines lighter in tone than some of the others. The list-like way in which this section of the poem is conveyed makes it clear that these are not uncommon occurrences. The people are used to them.

The problem that the speaker has with poets is made clearer in the third stanza of ‘A River’ as he speaks of the similarities between “old poets” and “new poets”. Both spoke about the floods, yet ignored the tragedies which resulted. In fact, to make it worse, the new poets copied what the old ones did. There was no evolution in style or subject.

In the fifth and sixth lines of this section, the speaker states that it is possible that the woman who died was going to give birth to twins, increasing the life lost. This is a very interesting contrast to the flooding of the river in the first place. The waters are meant to fertilize the land and make it possible for the next crop to grow. Life is destroyed as it is being created.

In the final stanza, the speaker relays the words of the poet again. He said that the poet complained of how “the river has water enough / to be poetic / about only once a year”. It is only once a year that the poets pay attention to it, and even then they don’t want to speak about the loss of property or life.

The speaker repeats a section of the second stanza again, restating what was lost. There are additional details added. Now, he says that the woman believed she was “expecting identical twins”. They were going to be perfectly the same, with no way to tell them apart except through dressing them in “coloured diapers”. This is another humorous line, but it has a darker undertone. It speaks to the lack of care with which the poets approached the land and people. There is no desire to know who these people are or quest to adequately depict their suffering.

Literary Devices:

Ramanujan makes use of consonance in these lines with the repetition of the “g” sound. Rhythm is also created through the use of reuse of the word “sand” in lines six and seven. Then, in general, the repetition of words beginning of “s,” or words that carry the “s” sound. This is especially true for the first half of the stanza.

Everything about the drainage system is old and in need of repair. The bridge is in patches, a fact that is revealed when the waters recede. In the last lines of this stanza, Ramanujan uses two metaphors to compare the stones to animals. The wet ones appear like crocodiles sleeping and the dry as lounging water-buffaloes. Despite all of this, the poets “only sang of the floods.” There is so much more to the city that the poets are ignoring. The poet uses culture-bound images in the poem. Indianism is much prevalent throughout the poem.