

# Notions of Scepticism and Agnosticism in The Selected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan with Special Reference to *Second Sight*, *A Hindu to His Body*, *Conventions of Despair* and *The Hindu: He doesn't hurt a fly*

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**Abstract:** A.K. Ramanujan was born in 1929 in Mysore to a Brahmin family and was educated in Mysore and Pune. He became a Fulbright Scholar at Indiana University from 1960 to 1962. He worked as a lecture in English initially in India, and later on joined University of Chicago as a Professor of Dravidian Studies and Linguistics. He settled there till his last breath in 1993. He died due to medical complications after a menial operation. He has 15 books in his credit. He was not a poet only but an institute in himself. He was a scholar, philologist, folklorist, translator and polyglot. He knew English, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Sanskrit very well and could express himself effortlessly in these languages.

His poetic works in English include The Striders (1966), Relations (1971), Selected Poems (1976) and Second Sight (1986). The Black Hen was his posthumous work published in 1995.

His contribution in the field of Indo- English poetry is spectacular. He grew into a celebrated personality in India and abroad as well in the literary field. He was honoured with Padma Sri Award in 1976. He received Mac Arthur Prize Fellowship and was also rewarded with the gold medal of the Tamil Writer's association for *The Interior Landscape* in 1969. He was also conferred on Sahitya Akademy Award posthumously. His poetic knack demonstrates an emblematic modern ethos of India in a distinctive modernistic method and technique.

## **Key Words:**

Scepticism, Indian Belief, Heritage, Human values, Modernity, Karma, Birth, Spirit, Religion

“A poem is really never finished, it is only abandoned.” (1) This statement once given by A.K. Ramanujan in one of his interviews possesses the notions of scepticism and agnosticism in itself. This paper analyses some of his finest poems in terms of highlighting the notions of scepticism and agnosticism which is one of the chief striking features of modern poetry in general and A.K. Ramanujan's poetry in particular. But before going into that, it is very essential to know the meaning of scepticism as well as agnosticism.

Scepticism is an attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object. Furthermore, it is doubt concerning basic religious principles such as immortality, providence, and revelation. (2)

Similarly, Agnosticism is the belief of someone who does not know, or believes that it is impossible to know, if a god exists. (3)

The English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley coined the word *agnostic* in 1869, and said "It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe." Earlier thinkers, however, had written works that promoted agnostic points of view, such as Sanjaya Belatthaputta, a 5th-century BCE Indian philosopher who expressed agnosticism about any afterlife and Protagoras, a 5th-century BCE Greek philosopher who expressed agnosticism about the existence of "the gods". (4)

The very first poem that has been taken into consideration here is *Second Sight*. This poem is an exposition of sceptical views of A.K. Ramanujan about the Hinduism. He focuses on the philosophic nature of Hinduism which can give the believers hope, faith and strength, to face the hardships of life with composure, courage, courage and fortitude. So, the popular view of Hinduism that it saves its follower from endless tortures of life is mistaken view and need to be rectified. The poem begins with the statement:

“In Pascal’s endless queue,  
people pray, whistle, or make  
remarks.” (5)

The poet here refers to Blaise Pascal, who was a legendary French mathematician, physicist, philosopher and writer.) Pascal perceived that mankind has had been always in chains, condemned to a life of melancholy and desperateness with no ray of hope of reprove or happiness. In the endless queue they pray, whistle or make remarks which slow their helplessness and miseries. But when they find a Hindu among them, their hopes revive and they feel relieved because a Hindu, in their eye is a man who possesses ‘Second Sight’ (It is generally perceived among the people about Hinduism that it is connected with spiritual wisdom). The poet says;

“As we enter the dark,  
Someone says from behind,  
You are Hindoo, aren’t you?  
You must have second sight.” (6)

Later on, the poet emphasises that it is just a false assumption and illusory perception among people as Hindu is no longer a man of 'spiritual wisdom'. He is no better than others and it is simply a myth which carries no weight in the world of reality. So, the poet wishes to regain his first and only sight that is his consciousness of five senses- the sense apparatus with which we all are born. He compares his predicament to a night- blind son- in -law groping for his wife and fumbling from one pocket to another in search of a match. See:

"I fumble in my nine  
pockets like the night- blind  
son- in -law groping  
in every room for his wife." (7)

So, the poet puts forth a reality that a Hindu has no secret formula or second sight. In fact, he has only 'one sight without sufficient light' to come out of the dark tunnel where he too struggles like others.

The second poem that comprises this research paper is *A Hindu to His Body*. This poem depicts the notions of agnosticism as it questions the established orthodox Hindu point of view. The conventional mode of Hindu philosophy of religion believes that the body is just a vehicle for the spirit and the spirit manifests itself through the body. But, on the contrary, the poet shows his attachment to the physical self as well. He addresses his body politely by calling it as;

"Dear pursuing presence,  
dear body: you brought me  
curled in womb and memory." (8)

He remarks that it is the body which has shown his identity in the world by giving him birth in the womb and by giving him memories of physical experience. It is due to our physical existence that we recognize life as it is through our five senses. So, he brings forth the idea that there is no existence of life without physical body. He asks his body to go along with the spirit after his death so that he can physically sense the thriving vibrations of life. See:

"When you leave all else,  
my garrulous face, my unkissed  
alien mind, when you muffle  
and put away my pulse

to rise in the sap of trees

let me go with you and feel the weight

of honey- hives, in my branching..." (9)

He adopts the modern viewpoint that also gives the significance to the body as well. He rejects the traditional Hindu belief that emphasizes: the soul takes its rebirth, not the body. The soul can adopt only a human form in accordance with the deeds of its previous birth. He openly manifests that it is through the body that the spirit is able:

"To clutch at grace, at malice; and ruffle

someone else's hair..."(10)

So, the poet wishes to continue 'journey of life (bodily sensation)' even after death when he disowns the soul- body duality by saying:

"You brought me: don not leave me behind." (11)

In this way, the poet appears to demystify old Hindu belief in the superiority of the soul vis- a – vis the body.

A.K. Ramanujan seems to have adopted a sceptical attitude towards cultural traditions in the Hindu poems. He is at the same time both ironic and detached in these poems Hindu poems. This is totally justified in another celebrated Hindu poem *THE HINDU: he reads his Gita and is calm at all events*. His attitude of scepticism develops the sense of detachment in his mind which he puts in his expression in the form of beautiful poetry. See:

"I, have learned to watch lovers without envy

as I'd watch in a bazaar lens

houseflies rub legs or kiss. I look at wounds calmly." (12)

He ridicules the stereotype image of the Hindu minded people who remain passive, calm and inactive even in the face of the worst provocation, because of the deep- rooted faith. He declares;

"...I come unstuck

and stand apart. I do not marvel

when I see good and evil: I just walk

over the iridescence

of horsepiss after rain. Knives, bombs, scandal,  
and cowdung fall on women in wedding lace:

I say nothing, I take not to gloat.” (13)

So, he being a Hindu reads Gita and remains calm and cool and detached and for him the trivial and the significant have the same importance and value. He doesn't believe in good or evil, which are essentials for any religion. So, these sorts of sentiments arouse the feeling of agnosticism in his mind. And he finds that it is absolutely useless to be religious if one can't voice against good or bad prevailing in the society. He is actually trying to convey the point that it is better to be an agnostic than to develop such kind of 'religiousness'

He finds no "inner concern" in the religion, culture or myths. Though, outwardly, he confesses that he cannot get away from this collective sense of 'Indianness' as the spiritual connotations of 'Indianness' are deeply imprinted in the minds of the people of India and he is no exception.

His next poem analysed from the point of view of scepticism and agnosticism is *Conventions of Despair*. This poem was published in his second volume of anthology 'Relations' (1971). In this poem, A.K. Ramanujan wishes to correlate his identity in India's history, past and present. He seeks comfort in a communal past. He constantly goes back to India's common heritage myth and tradition. His creative mind actually reflects the predicament of one who, while intellectually convinced of the need for relating himself to history through tradition, is exposed to the milieu- the contemporary Indian one- in which the main modes of the continuity of tradition, myth, literature, family are largely sterile. Even then, he is determined to seek his identity in India's past:

“I must seek and will find

my particular hell only in my Hindu mind:

must translate and turn

till I blister and roast

for certain lives to come...” (14)

The poet, here, puts reference of the concept of "Hell", which is a common characteristic of the after-life in Hindu religion. Because, in Hinduism texts, it is written that the person's soul, after the death, either goes to the heaven or the hell in accordance with the *karmas*. He, ironically, finds himself so pathetic that he believes that his soul will go to the hell.

But, these things occur in his perception only. It is just a dreadful innovation that comes out of his mind towards his 'inevitable death'. Because in the Hindu religion, there is a typical belief that *karma* gives way to next life. Good deeds result into good living in the next life. On the

other hand, bad deeds lead into to the bad and struggling life to come. So, the whole future of the soul depends on the “theory of karma”. The poem arises out of the Indian emotion with the western expression. He actually struggles to find a balance between tradition and modernity. This innermost unbalance pressurises him in rejecting both the modern as well as the Hindu conventions of despair. Ultimately, he embraces archaic despair:

“No, no give me back my archaic despair:

It’s not obsolete yet to live

in this many – lived lair

of fears, this flesh.” (15)

The irony of irony is that even, he being a Professor in the University which is highly payable job, he finds no solace or inner peace in being a modern. All the materialistic things around him cannot set his being at peace. Earlier in the poem, we find that the poet is shown aware enough to live a modern life when he writes;

“Yes, I know all that. I should be modern.

Marry again. See strippers at the Tease.

Touch Africa. Go to the movies.” (16)

So, modernity finds its direct or indirect unswerving expression in his poems. In one of his interviews, he also articulates that “Against Hinduism, I had the notion that only a kind of modern rationalism was the answer to all the problems that we had: the caste system, the problems of s hierarchy by birth.”(17) So, these notions have evolved the thought- processes of the human minds towards scepticism, agnosticism, rationality, logical and scientific thinking. A.K. Ramanujan has successfully followed the art and skill of using this terminology into his creative methodology in an artistic way.

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