

A Relative Evaluation of Ramanujan and Mahapatra from the Theoretical Point of View

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Introduction

In *Phaedrus* Plato refers to “the madness of those who are possessed by the Muses”. (Plato, p.31.) He projected the theory of Imitation. Aristotle, refuting the charges, placed his theory of aesthetic imitation. Imitation, in his opinion, is equal to ‘producing’ or ‘creating’ according to the ‘Idea’. Mathew Arnold put forth his theory that the poet has, in the first place, to choose an excellent action i.e. these actions which most strongly appeal to the great chief human affection to those basic feelings which exist eternally in the race and which are self-determining of time. T.S. Eliot, the significant modern critic, started feedback against subjectivism and distinctive practice. He was a classicist and a strong follower of tradition. In his opinion, the classical poets could achieve the completeness, maturity, order and balance only because they submitted to some restraint and followed some authority outside them. He was intensely influenced by Ezra Pound, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More and T.E. Hulme.

Many poet critics have discussed the theory of poetic creation, but only a few, remarkably like Ramanujan, have written about the reverse process, the incapability to write, the death of a poem. He was a linguist who selected words very cautiously. He expressed his opinions about the process through his articles and interviews. Being influenced by the early poetry of saint poets, he believes in the poetry created by the gift of god, as well as poetry as ‘making’. He also contributes to the theory by posing ‘death of a poem’. Ramanujan’s amazing gift to the theory of poetry is his poetry about the death of a poem. Many poet-critics have discussed their own theory of creativity, but almost none has commented on the reverse process. In the poem “Difficulty”, he elaborates his state of mind when he is not capable to write a poem because of his troubled mind:

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On the difficulty of writing
anything, when little demons
throw colours and hunger
cries tear through the paper
destroy the commas and devour
the passive voice
till lightning in a serial world
of words," (Ramanujan, lines 1-8.)

He puts forth the idea that it is hard to write a poem when the realistic world creates obstacles in the process. But, when there is lightning in a serial world of words, poetry springs out like an unlikely leaf in winter.

Jayanta Mahapatra began writing poetry very late and as a non-academic person. He does not take the position of a great poet or even as a critic. Working as a Professor of Physics for his career, he does not think of himself to be at the centre of the educational sphere. In his own words:

I admit that I am not an academic, and that I did not read any poetry until I started writing it myself which was rather late in life. Therefore, whatever I might have to say will only be a limited voice, because of my lack of proper critical approach, but certainly will move toward an honest realization of my innermost convictions" (Mahapatra; *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs*,p.83.)

Through his poems, interviews and various articles published in journals, as well as his book *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs*, Mahapatra has proved himself not only as a grand poet but also a critic who can scrutinize the nature and purpose of poetry. In them, he has evidently mentioned the influence of Keats and Wordsworth in the first phase of his poetry and when critics did not support his first two books, he wanted to improve. In an interview with Dr. Kusha Chandra Pradhan and Dr. Krushna Chandra Mishra in "Rock Pebbles", he observes, Critics were disappointed when my first two books of poems were published. And it hurt me. But I wanted to go on writing, so I began reading contemporary poetry, mainly the European and Latin American poets whom I consider to be the greats... (Mahapatra, Interview by Dr. K. C. Pradhun & Mishra, p.227.)

Ramanujan puts forth the contradictory side of the creativity. He confronts such a condition when he is not able to write the poem though he wishes to. It is quite motivating to note when a great poet like Jayanta Mahapatra appreciates this theory in his memoirs.(2007) He mentions it in his essay, "A. K.Ramanujan: A Tribute", as:

The best way to talk about a poet is through his poems and to my mind the best way to pay tribute to such a master of the brief word is to read his poems, as evident in this short poem titled "On the Death of Poem"...Open out the words of this poem, and it is a single sentence. (Mahapatra; *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs*, p.88.)

Again, Mahapatra says, "But what a marvelous one! Like an oriental box, a little difficult to open perhaps, but superbly beautiful. A poem that holds in its lines!" (Mahapatra; *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs*, p. 215.)

It is actually a magnificent tribute by one great poet to the other. In Ramanujan's opinion, there is no theory of creativity except the role of memories or the memory itself, as he has mentioned in his interview with Chirantan Kulshrestha (2001:48) - I simply write poems as they occur to me; I have to have no theory. It is true I have a number of poems which are obsessed not only with memories but with memory itself, memory as history and myth, memory as one's own past-the presence of the past-the way present gathers to itself different pasts (Ramanujan, "Interview One" p.48.)

Mahapatra compares love with poetry. Like love, everyone's explanation of poetry is different. He underlines the existence of truth in poetry and denies the place of lie in poetry. As in "Four Rain Poems", He puts it, "This lie has no poem." (Mahapatra; *RR*, line 24) He questions the poem which is an illusion: "Or is it a poem,/four warm and kindly lines thrown around,/to impress its will on us, an illusion?" ("Evening", *RR*, lines 5-7.).His idea getting mature, he proposes equation like "Poetry=Truth=Silence=Reality=Pain". In the poem, "All the Poetry There is", he writes-

Poetry simply wants to know what sort of thing war was, or a sunset, even a bizarre crime. It poetry always drowning one toward that distant fire?" (Mahapatra; *WB*, lines 13-23.)

Many of his poems talk about the creative process of a poem, how the poem is born. He believes in the situation of a poet to be a maker, a creator of the world, i.e. the world of imagination. His absence in the world of reality makes him believe against the earth. The earth is also frightened of him because he has the ability to establish a new world perhaps better than this earth.

In the last poem in *Collected Poems* entitled "Fear No Fall", (Ramanujan; *CP*) Ramanujan narrates the story of Arunagiri, who is a truant methodically. He tries to commit suicide, but astoundingly, he is saved by a very old man who tells him, "Sing now of Murugan". He doesn't know the skill and is puzzled, but the old Man gives him the first line of it and melts away like a figure in a mist. He is made to repeat the line which makes him write verses. This poem illustrates Ramanujan's approval of the theory of poetic creation through the gift of God. Arunagiri, ignorant about the skill of writing poetry, is capable to sing of Him only because of His blessings.

Similarly, "On the Death of the Poem" (Ramanujan; *CP*), presents the condition when the poet is not capable to write a poem. For any poet, while composing poems, it is essential that images should crowd in the mind and he arranges them. But when images themselves behave like 'the conscience stricken jury' and 'come slowly to a sentence', the poet is vulnerable. Surely, it is the death of the poem. The image, 'the conscience stricken jury' is carefully chosen by the poet as images which are personified, are much cautious about their behavior, and they come to the sentence after consulting each other.

Even though Ramanujan refuses to pursue or have any theory of creativity, his poetry demonstrates his own special theory of creativity and even death of it. In the opinion of Jayanta Mahapatra "the process of writing poetry is an ability to read the silence. The poetry seeks to have a hopeful and steady hour." (Mahapatra; Interview, 'Jayanta Mahapatra Talks to N. Raghavan', p.73) Mahapatra experiences that he is "made fool by the exquisite pain/ of this vision of loss of vision." (Mahapatra; "Colorlessness of Poetry", *Shadow Space* lines 14-15.) In the poem, "The Hollow Mouth", he says that this 'skeleton' is worthless, lifeless. He doesn't believe in 'toy-clockwork of poetry' (Mahapatra; "The Stories in Poetry", *Shadow Space*, line 7). Sometimes, the naked realism, the hunger, the scarcity make him take the face of the poet off and be a real, mere human being. There is a poem, "Illness" that shows how the poet has become dependent because of illness.

In these poems, he presents the predictability to write poems, helplessness before the well-built creative 'wave' from within. At the same time, he presents even those situations in which he is awaiting words to come and he is in despair. Many poet critics have discussed the theory of poetic formation, but a few, exceptionally like Ramanujan, have written about the reverse process, the inability to write, the death of a poem. In the later phase of his writing, he talks of this situation. Taking a white paper to write on it, he just finds that language going up and down, not taking any appropriate shape "All night words of mine dirt,/ nearing meaning but never finding it./And that is all there is:/the skeleton of their vanity never surprises me." (Mahapatra; "The Time Afterward", *WB* lines 11-14.)

But Mahapatra uses poetry, the course of creation as a metaphor to elaborate life situations. As a responsive person and poet, Mahapatra is very much confident about the functions of poetry. The poem "Song of the Bones" in *Burden of Waves and Fruit*, discusses the functions. In his opinion, a poem should lift itself brushing the face of shadows into light. It should help him to express the sorrow not only personal but also of masses. It should help him to reveal the secrets of the forefathers who toiled and moaned. He has presented his opinions about the nature and functions of poetry, its imaginative process, difficulty in writing and role of critics very deliberately. He has proved himself to be a serious critic in this sense. In his book, *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs*, he has referred to Ramanujan as a good poet but has denounced as a 'Classic' poet.

A. K. Ramanujan's poetry was pervaded with a sense of Indianness, but it entered quite unconsciously, and with a remarkable sensitivity. Right until his death last year, Ramanujan exhibited a concern for poetic craftsmanship that makes him one of our most satisfying poets writing in English. It is easy to cite examples of good competent poems in the poetry of Daruwalla, or Ezekiel, or Parthasarathy, or Ramanujan but they are never near the definition of a classic. (Mahapatra, pp.47-48.)

He sees poets "to be powerless of integrating their experience; so the poetry remains a process- fragmentary, like an unfinished argument." (Ibid, p.52.)

The theory of creativity is clearly, discussed in the poem "No Fifth Man" (Ramanujan; "The Black Hen", *CP*). This poem is in two parts. The first part narrates on old Sanskrit parable connected to five Brahmins. They have learnt some skills and are walking through the forest. They come about to see a bone. The first says, "I can form the whole skeleton out of it" ("The Black Hen"), he does it. The second says, "I can apply flesh and blood to it" ("The Black Hen") and he provides them to the outline. The third fulfils his desire to provide the skin and outer organs which beautifies the tigress. The magnificent tigress is formed before them. The fourth, who knows the skill to make it alive, is about to give life to the creature when the fifth apologizes to them and climbs up a tree. Then the fourth chants the mantras and-

gave the tigress life,
death, a heartbeat,
an eye for the prey and
a raging hunger all
at once inspiring
terror in beauty, changing

a nothing into a thing never before. (Ramanujan;"No Fith Man",*CP* lines 62-68)

The hungry tigress pounces on the four and kills them for starters 'not leaving even a bone'. The second part makes the parable a powerful allegory as "Poetry too is a tigress,/except there is no fifth/man left on a tree/when she takes your breath away" (Ramanujan; "No Fith Man" *CP*,lines 75-79.)

In this poem, Ramanujan presents his theory of creativity as creating a poem which brings out the creation of the poem from selecting the kernel or the theme, giving it a correct shape, life and soul along with its natural beauty. It is not a single action of taking the frame or adding flesh and blood to it or giving soft skin or providing 'soul'. It is the sequential mixture of all these activities which results in a great, influential poem. This work of creation is so commanding that it can transcend the creator himself if no fifth man, the witness, is there. Further, the line, "Changing a nothing into a thing never before" (Ramanujan; "No Fith Man" *CP* lines 75-79.) elaborates the theory itself. The 'Poet' only has ability to change 'a nothing' into 'a thing never before'.

In the view of Jayanta Mahapatra, the process of writing poetry is an skill to read the stillness. The poetry seeks to have an optimistic and stable hour. He experiences that he is:

made fool by the exquisite pain
of this vision of loss of vision,
and all colors pass within
the heroic colourlessness:
careful reapers ready to cut down
the sad-faced crop of poetry. (Mahapatra; "Colorlessness of Poetry": *Sh. Sp.*,
lines 14-19.)

In these poems, he presents the inevitability to write the poems, helplessness before the strong creative wave from within. Simultaneously, he presents even those situations in which he has to wait for words to come and he is in despair.

Like the theory of impersonality of T.S. Eliot, he describes the wave of the poem starting in his mind, going up and ending in silence leaving the scratches on the skin from within. The poem not only tortures him from within but also leaves the marks. He is obliged to write. It happens to him that the contemplation, the kernel is so sensible like bloodshed, spiritual riots, etc. But, he does not want to write about it. He closes the entrance of the creative mind. But, it knocks at the door and comes in – "The great door opening brazenly /to reveal another misshapen light, light that held/the uncorrupted language of creation, of birth gone blind /as it leaps from tree to tree in the blazing sun?" (Mahapatra; "An Afternoon", *BWF*, lines 23-26.)

As they define the theory of poetry, it is something that comes out of their hearts unknowingly which carries their dreams, pains, bare truth and reality and still it is like drinking moon, worshipping the sun and polishing the light on their hearts. They do not make the mistake of presenting only one side of the poetry. They present also the opposite side of it boldly. In the country like India, poetry cannot reach the masses and create its effect. So, many times, both Ramanujan and Mahapatra think that the poem should have capacity to make the reader think for a while and feel restless. It doesn't happen as they try to reach the roots.

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