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THE NECESSITY OF HYPHENS - Among many people, in many places

Second Thoughts / Githa Hariharan



A.K. Ramanujan: to give and receive

Having spent many years of his life in the department of south Asian languages and civilizations at the University of Chicago, A.K. Ramanujan liked to describe himself as the hyphen in "Indian-American". Re-reading the work of this poet, translator and curator of folklore, it strikes me that Ramanujan is also a hyphen, that valuable go-between, among Indians. I first encountered Ramanujan's work when I was an ignorant but earnest seventeen-year-old college student in Mumbai. Day after day my well-meaning

teachers helped me negotiate a world of literature and culture where all the practitioners were white, preferably English. Nothing was "lost in translation" because translators were, for all practical purposes, an unknown species.

Anything beyond the prescribed literary canon I came across was by accident. A friendly teacher introduced me to Kawabata, Kafka, Camus and Dostoyevsky; the college library to some dusty, neglected volumes of Tagore. The rest came in serendipitous bits and pieces in bookshops that offered discounts to poor but greedy students.

It was around this time that a friend, Semine, gave me a copy of A.K. Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva*. She wrote on the flyleaf, "Maybe these *vachanas* will inspire you to write better poetry." I lost touch with Semine soon after, and, fortunately, with my poetry as well. But the slim volume of *vachana* translations remains with me. So does my early love for these poems. *Vachana* means, simply, "what is said". They are intensely personal, even intimate conversations, between the poet and the beloved — some form of Siva the *vachana* composer is deeply enamoured of. I am not equipped to judge Ramanujan's translations, but through them I fell in love with the four major Virashaiva "saints", Basava, Dasimayya, Allama, and Mahadevi. I suspect this must be the hope of any translator: to make the reader forget she is reading a translation; to evoke admiration and gratitude not for the translation, but the translated work.

I think I was attracted most by Mahadevi's work at first. For a girl whose literary intimacies were confined to Jane Austen, at best George Eliot, how heady it was to read lines such as "Take these husbands who die, decay, and feed them to your kitchen fires!" and "How can I bear it when He is here in my hands, right here in my heart, and will not take me?"

But as I read on, the need to "identify" with the writer — so major a guiding force in adolescent literary judgement — loosened its hold. The intellectual puzzles in Allama Prabhu's *vachanas* teased me with their complexities. His poems are called "*bedagina vachanas*": "fancy" poems, apparently obscure and riddle-like, written in "twilight" or "topsy-turvy" language. The yield, I found, usually made up for the difficulty of cracking the hard little nut open with persistence. ("Light devoured darkness. I was alone inside. Shedding the visible dark, I was your target, O Lord of Caves.")

But perhaps it was Basava's poetry which summed up best everything I learnt from Ramanujan's *vachana* translations: that it's possible to find a contemporary voice in the past. That the tussle between tradition and modernity is a continuous one; that the gap between the powerful and the powerless is as wide (if not wider) within a temple as it is without. "The rich will make temples for Siva. What shall I, a poor man, do? My legs are pillars, the body the shrine, the head a cupola of gold. Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers, things standing shall fall, but the moving ever shall stay."

Many years later, Ramanujan's work again ferried me to the meeting of rivers. As an adult, with much easier access to more than the English canon, I discovered

Ramanujan's "tellings and retellings" of epics, folk tales, proverbs and riddles; and his elegant, insightful essays on the ways in which they flow together. His essays make it clear that epics such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and *Silappadikaram* can never be merely "official". Valmiki's *Ramayana* is bound up with a sparkling array of other *Ramayanas*, or other stories of Rama, some nugget-sized but potent. One story, for example, describes how sixteen thousand sages want to turn into women because they have fallen in love with Rama. But Rama asks them to wait — he has taken a vow of monogamy in this life. But when he comes back as Krishna, he tells them, they can be his beloved cowherds.

In the Jain retellings, Ravana is a tragic figure, killed by Lakshmana, not Rama. In a Kannada folk *Ramayana*, Ravula (the Ravana figure) becomes pregnant, and at the end of nine days, sneezes Sita into existence. (In Kannada the word *sita* also means "he sneezed.") This motif of Sita as Ravana's daughter occurs elsewhere — in, for instance, Jain stories, Telugu folk traditions, and in several southeast Asian *Ramayanas*. "The oral traditions," writes Ramanujan, "partake of... themes unknown in Valmiki." How, he asks, do these tellings and retellings, oral and written, epic and tale, relate to each other?

They do it in ways that impoverish a part — one story or tradition or genre — if it is mistaken for the whole. The grand saga of the epic has to be viewed along with its homely versions, folk tales and traditions that are cut down to size for daily consumption. Love, death, incest, the afterlife — nothing is too big or subtle for the debate conducted among these tales; and between this earthy body of tales and the more revered "classical" texts and traditions. Acknowledging the familial relationships among all the possible types of "tellings" means a reward of an astonishing body of systems, counter-systems; traditions, alternative traditions; tales and counter-tales, private and public lore, a large and amorphous body that can never quite be complete as long as people continue to "complete" the telling for their times and lives.

It is this multiplicity, this use of a heritage to hold something for every one of its heirs, which makes for a common heritage. Postcolonial writers have "balanced" the view offered by the classics they were fed, whether it is a Maori writer rewriting Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" from the point of view of the poor little house down the lane that receives the party leftovers; or Jean Rhys' retelling of the story of the mad Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. We are lucky. It seems we still have a reservoir of multiple, mutating tales, both written and oral, that tell us what a bewildering, complicated, heterogeneous world we live in. When we have this reservoir, how absurd it is to carry a warring cardboard Rama like a military banner! Or a syrupy sweet cardboard Sita to bully every budding woman into submission!

Perhaps the biggest gift Ramanujan the go-between has given us through his work on our rich heritage is showing us how important it is for culture to travel; to give and receive. Almost as a recipe for world literature, Ramanujan quotes the twelfth century Kshemendra: "A poet should learn with his own eyes/ the form of leaves/... /his mind should enter into the seasons/ he should go/ among many people/ in many places/ and learn their languages."



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