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**'REGIONALISM' IN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS OF  
JAYANTA MAHAPATRA AND A.K. RAMANUJAN**

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**Abstract**

Regionalism refers to texts that concentrate heavily on specific, unique features of a certain region including dialect, customs, tradition, topography, history, and characters. It focuses on the formal and the informal, analyzing the attitudes characters have towards one another and their community as a whole. In Indian English poetry Jayanta Mahapatra and A.K. Ramanujan felt the urge to rediscover their native roots in specific locations and places. Mahapatra and Ramanujan's use 'of relationship in their poems needs to be explored. This paper will deal with the social and historical background of these poets, influences on their poems and survey their major works. In this paper I intend to explore the positive and negative implications of the term regional and look for more than one definition of the term poetry. A.K. Ramanujan applied the terms akam (inner) and puram(outer) from classical Tamil poetry to his own poetry in English. Ramanujan defined regionalism as the particularity of experience. Passion for the place, people, landscape does not make the poems narrow in their appeal. According to Jayanta Mahapatra his passion for the place and landscape in Orissa does not restrict him within these boundaries. It was in the mid-seventies that a change came about in English poetry written in India. It was the native culture that found expression in the poems of the Indian English poets. Mahapatra and Ramanujan sought to concretise abstract universal values by locating their poems in specific regions. In my analysis of the poems of Mahapatra and Ramanujan I have tried to establish that 'regionalism' as a critical concept as applied to poetry is not parochial or divisive. These poets transcended the limitations and boundaries of their own region. Their works have been published in America and England. In this I have discussed the background and upbringing of Jayanta Mahapatra and Ramanujan's and have analysed their poems. I have tried to make a comparative study of Mahapatra and Ramanujan.

Key words: regionalism, post-colonial, tradition, historical, modernism, parochial, divisive

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## Introduction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary 'regionalism' is defined as regional distinctiveness in literature, the study of relation of man to geographical areas and the potentialities which their relation presents in terms of human welfare and progress. Emphasis on regional locale and regional characteristics in art and literature. That is the product of fidelity to the habit, speech, manner, history folklore and belief, of a particular geographical region. During the 1950s there were changes in the tone and content of Indian poetry in English. The impact of T.S. Eliot, Pound on poetry of I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis on literary criticism, of Picasso in art and the influence of American jazz music were delayed.

In 1992 John Oliver Perry, in his groundbreaking meta-critical work *Absent Authority*, analysed in detail the complexities arising out of combining 'Indigenous and Western criticism for Indian English Poetry, and surveyed the various paths chosen by a number of Indian and non-Indian critics since the 1950s. Perry's own position stresses a multicultural contextualization of Indian Poetry in English that accommodates its indigenous idiosyncrasies. By „indigenous“ he understands a wide continuum of Indian literary and critical traditions as well as those Western theories that have been imported, assimilated, and reformulated by Indian critics thus 'indigenized; or 'adapted to indigenous issues and cultural circumstances. (Perry 268)

The study of A.K. Ramanujan's aesthetics and poetics incorporates both Indian and Western paradigms, such as the classical *marga/desi/videshi* distinction or the *Akam/Puram* conceptual pair introduced to contemporary Indian literary criticism most prominently by A.K. Ramanujan and acknowledge thereby his advocacy for an indigenous terminology. He applied those in innovative ways not only to the study of classical, medieval, and oral literary traditions but to contemporary Indian literature and to himself. (28) In an interview Ramanujan says that "his writing obtains its 'nourishment" from his Indian Culture : 'those are

the roots. That is what binds us back to our childhood and all the early years."(Ramanujan "Meeting"13) It is Ramanujan's particularity of experience which enriches his poetry and reflects his intrinsic link with Mysore and Tamil Nadu.

In —A.K.Ramanujan: A Tribute Jayanta Mahapatra writes : 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 the short poem titled —On the death of a Poem||. Open out the words of this poem and it is a single sentence. But what a marvellous one! Like an oriental box, a little difficult to open perhaps, but superbly beautiful. A poem that holds magic in its lines! ...He will be remembered for the inquiry he brought into South Indian culture, sweeping, as it were the ancient literature of India into the arena of the present day.(*Door of Paper*217)

A poet should be responsible to his own conscience. Other factors like craft and language come much later. According to him the poem with its words, triggers and inner silences and in the end shakes one. A poet does not become a reformer. He is driven by longing, driving large words with this longing that overwhelms him. Mahapatra says , I have salvaged the hours of loss for my own self-expression in poetry, Time acts as a carrier wave. And Mahapatra realizes that the language of poetry is made up of time, not words. He says, when I look back on a poem written a time ago, I can see my very existence at the moment the poem was made, carrying me away on the tide of the poem's nostalgia. And that feeling can have a disastrous effect on the new poem I am trying to write. In between poems time moves like a frail ghost of an enemy standing ahead in my path... And as I advance, both in my poetry and in my years, I feel I am perhaps driving the victim of time ahead of me. (*Door of Paper* 224) . Mahapatra doesn't have the feeling that he is in exile. This feeling is there in Ramanujan. Ramanujan tries to pose his experiences in the native place and his experiences in Chicago while in Chicago Ramanujan started translating poems from Kannada and Tamil into English. According to D. Ramakrishna, It is difficult to put Ramanujan's writing in the straight

jacket of post coloniality. Terms like displacement, transfer, migration and alienation are typical of the postcolonial studies.

Ramanujan is certainly an exception as a writer functioning in an alien climate containing both the Eastern and the Western sensibilities within himself. Central to Ramanujan's vision is continuity, past and present, tradition and modernity, acting on each other endlessly. Ramanujan considered himself part of the modern Indian poetry scene which gained ground in the post independence years in India. Before leaving / ladies for the USA in 1959, had be friended some of the pioneering poets if the modernist who wre then shaping up, notably .....Patel and Nissim Ezekiel, in English and in Kanada P. Labkesh and the elder Gopala krishna Adiga, one of the major exponents of the navya (new) poetry that flourished in the 1950s under the impact of New Criticism and modernist poetics imported from the West. Ramanujan's critique of contemporary Indian poetry in English and in the regional languages was founded on the idea of a triple stream of traditions – regional, Sanskritic, and Western – coexisting in Indian literature as a storehouse of raw material available to modern poets. The success of a poet was partly contingent on his ability to combine these resources effectively through on individual poetic voice.

Ramanujan was indebted to Subramania Bharati. Bharati creatively used tradition in his poems `when they (the three traditions) meet in a poet of genius, the poetry is dynamic, .... Bharati here uses comtemporay Tamil to reach back into the past of the Vedas and forward into a future in modern Tamil poetry. (Ramanujan 343) The language of a poem expresses a given culture. It comes out of individual experiences. The poet calls it a `a repertoire of images, ideas or preconceptions'. Tradition and culture are related to one another in his poems. Translation was the mediating factor between language and tradition, language and culture: I belong to three languages or traditions and they are always speak. His poems achieved universality because of this attitude towards tradition. Ramanujan describes it as text-and-context sensitive approach. According to Rodriguez....6 . AKD's seminal contribution to

contemporary Indian poetics is primarily found in his conceptualization of tradition and translation and in how these are put to use for poetic practice ; (347) . The poet experimented with traditional poetic forms and techniques.

Ramanujan's poems move at times from the outer (puram) to the inner (akam) styles of classical Tamil poetry. This genre is Known as `kovai' in Tamil poetry. In a poem —Fear we find such a movemal from outer to the inner. The exterior landscape of —would museums/of Heroshima that well known child /napalm flames|| Ramanujan is alive to the perils of nuclear war, ethnic violence and all that were happening around the world. The second part of the poem shows the sense of insecurity the poet experience, in his mind — a certain knock/on the backdoor/a minute/after midnight. Akam does not remain a form of lover poetry but it becomes a form of fear.

In his poems, essays, interviews and diaries, the concept of tradition is discussed by Ramanujan `in all its complexity in connection with other poets' understanding of tradition as well as from his point of view as a modern Indian poet ? (Rodriguez 347). For Ramanujan tradition meant a continuous flow of cultural, historical and biological time, or memory, which he sought to integrate in his poetic art in a creative tension of connections as well as departures from the past and other bodies of writing: (Rodrigues 354).

In his poetry, in English, it is evident that he absorbed South Indian forms, devices, and techniques into modernist compositions. Rhythm, according to Ramanujan in `Linguistics and the study of Poetry as a recurrence of equivalent units. As Ramanujan influenced other Indian poets like Parthasarathy and Kolatkar with his concept of tradition Jayanta Mahapatra influenced a generation of Indian poets in the North East and in his own native state of Orissa and in Kerala . Robin S, Ngangom the prominent poet from North-East, has dedicated his first collection of verse to Jayanta Mahapatra. His first book of verse was published by Writers' Workshop Calcutta in 1988. Mahapatra says in `Mystery as Mantra : Younger poets from various parts of India were coming out with their

poems ; suddenly there was Meena Alexander writing from her ancestral background in Kerala, Robin S.Ngangom composing a rooted poetry from the North east. It was the native culture that was showing in the poem of the Indian English Poet.(*Door of Paper*33)

Both Ramanujan and Mahapatra incorporated regional elements into their English poetry. Ramanujan's effort in presenting to the world Tamil and Kannada poems in English translation was an act of incorporating regional elements into English poetry . He said, I translate out of my creative urge'. His translated poems have influenced his English poems. Ramanujan's fondness for Tamil and Kannada elements and Mahapatra's fondness for Oriya scenes and landscape made Indian English poetry rich in regional elements. This foregrounding of regional elements in English poetry is a unique attempt on their part to highlight the people, place, landscape, mythology, history that make these locations remarkable. Such an attempt to foreground to foreground the region was found in Kanthapura and R.k.Narayan's novels. Malgudi is both regional and universal. Such an effort in Indian English Poetry offers fresh perspective.

### Conclusion

Mahapatra and Ramanujan sought to concretise abstract universal values by locating their poems in specific regions. I have tried to establish that they transcend the limitations and boundaries of regionalism Regionalism is not a limitation in their poems. Mahapatra does not believe in boundaries. In his poems he seeks to highlight the suffering of the people of the place, projects the landscape and goes deep into history . His identity, is bound to his own place. Ramanujan believes in the particularly of experience'. And context is very important in his poems. Mahapatra and Ramanujan engage with the culture and geography of their regions. Such poetic practice juxtaposes modernism and regionalism. These poets identify themselves with the region. Being bilingual poets they incorporate into their English Poems ideas and images from their regional languages. They

transcend parochialism and are able to universalise their experiences.

This is how his poems acquire universal appeal. When Mahapatra was asked in an interview What do you mean by 'home' in your poetry? Is it actual home or 'imagined home' ? he replied : I have no clear answer for this. Perhaps it is —yesterday, this poetic home of mine, I do not know. And in this yesterday is the man behind me, who is not alone, who is not left to himself, nor does he wish to meet his self or , my home is there, at the fulfilment of my desire, but is so far away that my eyes are looking into a future that never arrives. Or, perhaps my home is in a buried silence, where love and grief are both present and there is no way of knowing one from the other. In this paper I have tried to establish that the poetry of Mahapatra and Ramanujan are not parochial and divisive. Regionalism' as a critical concept is not parochial or divisive.

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