

**APPLICATION OF PHONOLOGICAL DEVICES IN A.K.
RAMANUJAN'S POETRY**

Dr. Seeta Rani

Department of English
J.K.P. (P.G.) College
Muzaffarnagar

Abstract

The essence of poetry lies in the figurative and evocative use of words, in the exactness and concreteness of description, in the aesthetic quality of experience and in the rhythmic motion of thought and the languages etc. A.K. Ramanujan is a master of creative language. The language of his poetry is highly innovative and creative. He takes delight in experimenting with language. He knows that words are the soul of poetry, so he uses his words very carefully. He has the capacity to turn language into an artifact. He is not only conscious about the use of words but also very much conscious about their placement to create music and charms in his poems. Keeping this view in mind, the present paper aims at making an assessment of A.K. Ramanujan's poetry in the light of phonological devices. Phonemes (Sounds) are the soul of poetry. This paper unfolds how Ramanujan uses the phonemes to make his poetry charming and melodious.

Every language has a limited number of distinctive sound units called phonemes. They are distinctive in the sense that they are the smallest units in the sound system of a language which can be used to differentiate the meanings. The phonemes of a language can be found by collecting minimal pairs, i.e. pairs of words which differ only in one sound segment. A series like pet, bet, debt, get, jet, vet, set, met, net, let, yet and wet gives us a list of twelve English phonemes/p/,/b/,/dz/,/g/,/d/,/v/,/s/,/m/,/n/,/l/,/j/,/w/. Other phonemes can be found by similar arrangement in various positions. The charming arrangement of phonemes is the foremost basis of poetry. To be familiar with this foremost quality the knowledge of phonemes and phonetics is quite useful for a reader. It is to be noted that phonetics is not a language specific, that is, its principles and concepts are applicable to any language, because it seeks to describe the basic speech mechanism, and principles of speech production.

A.K. Ramanujan is one of the best creative talents who have made their mark in Indian poetry in English. He has oblique, clinical and his own personal style and it is through his personal style by which he gives a sharp focus to his

experience. Chirantan Kulshreshta has aptly commented that his poetry shows a ‘chiselled workmanship’.¹ According to R. Parthasarathy, his language is ‘rapier sharp’ and has a ‘glass like quality’.²

The present paper is a modest attempt to study and explore how Ramanujan uses the phonological devices in his poems to make it musical and interesting. He is a conscious craftsman who employs and exploits all the phonological sources of the language to a great extent. The various phonological devices used by him are alliteration, assonance, and rhyme and rhythm through similarity of sounds to draw the attention of the reader. Apart from these, onomatopoeia is also used to make the impact greater. He uses the simplest possible words, mostly monosyllabic to make his diction musical and sweet sounding. Right words are used in the right place, and not a single word is superfluous. Ramanujan richly deserves the praise he received from the critics for his craftsmanship and use of language. R. Parthasarathy is right in saying,

Ramanujan on the other hand has been able to forge an oblique, elliptical style all his own.... There is something clinical about Ramanujan’s use of language. It has a cold, glass-like quality. It is an attempt to turn language into an artifact.³

Let us begin with the use of alliteration. Alliteration is an important device which has been used by Ramanujan in his poems, especially at the beginning of words, stressed syllables is repeated. The poetic diction of Ramanujan tends to be alliterative and rhythmical at certain places. An instance of his sweeping alliteration and rhythm is as follows:

The traffic light turns orange
on 57th and Dorchester, and you stumble,
you fall into a vision of forest fires,
enter a frothing Himalayan river,
rapid, silent.

(Chicago Zen, 186)

Here the phoneme /f/ is repeated and this is a fine example of alliteration in the expression “forest fires”. In the poem the word “fall” preceding it and “frothing” succeeding it adds to the charm and appeal of the alliteration. The phoneme /f/ and /r/ (the latter in “river” and “rapid”) are repeated at varying intervals and produce impressive internal rhymes.

The poem “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing”, is a short lyric of barely twenty-three lines, and is fairly notable for its simple diction and unadorned style:

When she was four or five
she sat on a village swing
and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her;
x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

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If someone suddenly sneezed.

(Looking for a Cousin on a Swing, 19)

In this example, there is a repetition of /s/ sounds. The repetition of this phoneme tells about the strange sensation felt by a premature girl and a small boy while they were on a “village swing”. Experiencing this strange sensation, they climb a tree which is not very tall and yet full of leaves. The phoneme /s/ is a good example of alliteration in the expression like “someone suddenly sneezed” and in the words like “she”, “sat”, “swing”, “six”, “seven”, and it adds the beauty to intensify the emotion. He uses /s/ phoneme not only for strange sensation but also to indicate about the age of her cousin who is six and seven. They are innocent about what they do on the tree. The poet tells that the same girl now having grown into a mature woman lives in a city and goes on haunting for companions of her lust. She is ever ready to give herself to anyone who wants her. Very aptly, the poet has shifted the scene from “village” to “cities” and the innocent girl to a mature woman. The repetition of phonemes like, /n/, /b/, /s/, /z/, /v/ and /f/ contribute to the changing patterns of emotions of the girl.

In the poem “Prayers to Lord Murugan” A.K. Ramanujan conveys his meaning by employing the alliterative device. An example of this device is given below:

Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand
in our fight
with the fruit fly
Tell us,
will the red flower ever
come to the branches
of the blueprint...

(Prayers to Lord Murugan, 114)

This passage unquestionably abounds in alliterative and rhythmical lines; it is also rich in internal rhyme. The repetition of /g/ sounds in the first two lines in “green”, “growing”, and “give”. And the repetition of /f/ sounds in the last two lines in “fight”, “fruit”, and “fly”. The poem, taken as a whole, is incantatory in effect and in its earnest invocations to Lord Murugan, the ancient Dravidian God of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love, having six faces and twelve hands. Speaking of the naked Jaina monk, the poet writes as follows:

A naked Jaina monk
ravaged by spring
fever, the vigour
of long celibacy
lusting now as never before
for the reek and sight

of mango bud, now tight, now
loosening into petal,
stamen, and butterfly,
his several mouths
thirsting for breast,
buttock, smells of finger,
long hair, short hair,
the wet of places never dry,...

(Pleasure, 139)

This poetic passage is not only suggestive but rhythmical too. The words used in it are primarily short and crisp. Very evocatively it describes the special features of a female attracting even a self-contained male like the Jaina monk, who is proverbial for the practice of celibacy, non-violence and truth. In such descriptions either of a person, place or thing, the poet's keen sense of observation is revealed.

The alternative modes of temporal organization in the poem "Saturdays", enable the poet's persona to see that his "daily dying body" ironically serves as "the one good omen/in a calendar of ominous Saturdays". In his own fictionalized biography a Saturday is ominous because his mother and one of his brothers supposedly passed away on that day of the week, though on different dates and different places. In a moment of ironic superstition and saturnine irony, the poet can imagine his own end as a "good omen", since dying on a Saturday would have the force of a predestined or over determined event. In fact, he feels that his body's internal rhythm is already synchronized with his composite calendar because:

Saturdays ache
in shoulder bone and thigh bone,
dim is the Saturday gone
but iridescent
is the Saturday to come:
the window, two cherry trees,
Chicago's four November leaves,
the sulphuric sky now a salmon pink,
a wife's always clear face
now dark with unspent
panic, with no third eye, only a dent,
the mark marriage leaves on a small forehead
with ancestors in Syria, refugees

from Roman Saturdays.

(Saturdays, 151-152)

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In the freeze-frame of the future projected by his own and others' pasts, he sees himself "imprisoned in reverse/in the looking/glass image of a posthumous twin", who is "the older man in the sage/blue chair" who turns around 'to walk through the hole in the air', and whose body contains, co-ordinates, and interconnects all natural, historical, mythical, and astrological cycles.

The Poem, "Still Another View of Grace" is a fine example of his use of phonetic devices. In this poem the poet uses phonetic devices variously:

I burned and burned. But one day I turned
and caught that thought
by the scream of her hair and said: 'Beware.
Do not follow a gentleman's morals
with that absurd determined air.
Find a priest. Find any beast in the wind
for a husband. He will give you a houseful
of legitimate sons. It is too late for sin,
even for treason. And I have no reason to know your kind.
Bred Brahmin among singers of shivering hymns
I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the street
beyond the constable's beat.' But there She stood
upon that dusty road on a nightlit april mind
and gave me a look. Commandments crumbled
in my father's past. Her tumbled hair suddenly known
as silk in my angry hand, I shook a little

and took her, behind the laws of my land.

(Still Another View of Grace, 45)

Here in the poem the use of phonetic pattern in the following expressions, "burned" "turned", "caught" "thought", "find" "wind", "kind" "mind", "land" "hand", "priest" "beast", "treason" "reason", "crumbled" "tumbled", "look" "took" and "shook" is noteworthy. These are the examples of internal rhyme. The poem has a consonantal pattern with its repetition of consonantal sounds and clusters like /z/, /s/, /s/, /s/, /k/ and /st/, /zn/ gives it a staccato rhythm reinforcing the emotion in the speaker's words. The dentals phonemes /t/, /n/, and /d/, are repeated in the poem and it adds the charm in the meaning of the poem. The poet burns with passion. The repetitive vocabulary "burned and burned" reveals the heat and intensity of passion. By the use of the dental phoneme he shows how he meets a street maiden who makes advances to her but he resists the temptation. Although he is aware of his moral background and chides the maiden for pursuing him, yet he forgets his father's valued advice, as he surrendered to her. In a fit of lustful passion he forgot "the laws of my land". The poet makes change of phonemes to show the changes in the

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behavior of the poet how nicely and skillfully he suggests his act of submission before passion.

Ramanujan also uses internal rhyme. He arranges the phonemes in such a way that this particular variety of phonetic repetition automatically becomes conspicuous. He often uses the nasal phoneme /n/ in combination with phoneme /g/ (/n/+g/=ŋ) which makes the expression musical. Few examples are given below:

1. And she just stood there,
looking at his walking on,
me looking at her looking on.

(Still Another for Mother, 15)

2. Working through sonnet forms, he turns
into an alley full of garbage cans
brimming with brown bags and plastic,
some pocking through the lid, paws
and hands of creatures struggling to escape.

(Poetry and our City, 242)

3. a raging hunger all
at once inspiring
terror in beauty, changing
a nothing into a thing never before,...

(No Fifth Man, 245)

4. looking for something,
half her body under the cot,
may be a rolling pin
her little son had brought for play
from under the kitchen mob
of cooking and washing relatives.

(History, 107)

He employs /n/ in combination with /g/ by forming the words like “looking”, “walking”, and again “looking”, “working”, “brimming”, “pocking”, “struggling”, “raging”, “inspiring”, “changing”, “nothing”, “thing”, “looking”, “something”, “rollin”, “cooking”, and “washing”.

The musicality of his verses is enhanced by a judicious application of consonance and assonance. Another Phonological device is assonance, which generally defined as similarity of vowels sounds in stressed positions, has also been employed, but it seems to be used less than alliteration. Assonance too like alliteration draws attention to the words, in which it occurs, and makes them prominent. For example in the poem “Take Care”:

In Chicago,

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do not walk slow.
Find no time
to stand and stare.
Down there, blacks look black
And whites, they look blacker.

(Take Care, 104)

Here the repetition of /i/, /o/ and /a/ vowels in “in”, “Chicago”, “walk”, “slow”, “find”, “time”, “stand”, “stare”, “down”, “black”, “whites”, “look”, add to the musical effect in the poem. And here the poet describes the tribal distinction in Chicago with the help of images like black house against white snow, black and white squires on kitchen cloth and pepper and salt. The poet blames the whites that hate black with their racial feelings. Here is a pattern in which he brings into play assonance:

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows,
despite the well-known laws
of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

(Self-Portrait, 23)

The poem “Self Portrait” has a single sentence spread in nine short lines, concluding that his father has signed the portrait in a corner. There is a liberal use of eye-rhymes and assonance like, “everyone” “unknown” “shop-windows” “lawa” “strangers” “corner” and “father” suggesting links in the lineage. It opens with “I” and ends with “father”. I tells us that he has no identity of his own, independent of his family, an engagement recurrent in Ramanujan’s poetry. There are many examples of this feature:

1. Only we, our uncle’s nephews, know
windows without walls
or the kinds of grass that grow
in the twinkle of an uncle’s eye.

(Real Estate, 92)

2. too old to swallow, too hungry to let go

(Dream in an Old Language, 198)

3. Any old quarrel over novel,
movie, or a suspicion
of pregnancy is enough

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to make wife, sister, or girl friend
walk silent from room to room...

(Any Cow's Horn Can Do it, 93)

There is a remarkable awareness and dexterity in the handling of rhyme and rhythm and most of his poems are accent-based, rhythmical and melodious. Usually, the lines in a passage are not arranged in any uniform pattern, and one witnesses alternations in the rhythmic pitch. There is no scope for monotony in his verse. Prof. Nagarajan rightly remarks that "Rhythmically and metrically there is interesting variety and skill in the poetry," and that most of his poems are "accent-based and colloquial".⁴

A.K. Ramanujan inter mingles short and long lines in a verse paragraph, and does not spare speech rhythms, slang and clichés. Although he does not arrange lines in a stanza or in any uniform pattern, they tend to reinforce cadenced movements and variations in tone, doing away with aridity and monotony. His use of free verse is excellent, widening the scope of expression considerably. He also uses internal rhyme in an effective manner. He nicely blends sound and sense. As an instance of his sweeping internal rhythm, the following extract from the poem "Snakes" is worth noting: "The clickshod heel suddenly strikes/and slushes on a snake: I see him turn..." The poet continuously uses this device in the poem. Please mark these lines too:

My night full of ghosts from sadness
in a play, my left foot listens to my right footfall,
a clockwork clicking in the silence
within my walking.

(Snakes, 5)

The repetition of phoneme /f/ and /I/ sounds in the first two lines, and /k/ and /ai/ and /w/ sounds in the last two, and then one will veer round the idea that the poet has a very alert ear to hear the ringing music produced by consonant and vowels and to reproduced it, with all its pulse-beat, in the vibrating verses. The use of the rhythmical harmony of the words, phrases and expressions and the fine application of rhyme shows his artistic creations. The placement of "night" and "right", of "full" and "fall", of "clockwork" and "clicking" and "within.....walking" shows the fine example of words rhythm.

The use of rhyme scheme is also an important phonological device used by him. As far as the poem "Breaded Fish" is concerned, it is impregnated with rhyme scheme. The poem in full is quoted below:

Specially for me, she had some breaded
fish; even thrust a blunt-headed
smelt into my mouth;

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and looked hurt when I could
neither sit nor eat, as a hood
of memory like a coil on a heath
opened in my eyes: a dark half-naked
length of woman, dead
on the beach in a yard of cloth,
dry, rolled by the ebb, breaded
by the grained indifference of sand. I headed
for the shore, my heart beating in my mouth.

(Breaded Fish, 7)

This poem is rhymed with a usual scheme of aab, ccb, aab, aab, written in the recurrent triplet stanza form, consisting of only two sentences. The first full stop comes almost after eleven and a quarter lines and then follows the concluding line making a total of twelve lines with four stanzas of one triplet each, unfolding a rather gruesome, unhappy tale. Two dissimilar, unconnected incidents light up each other; both belong to the past; both are sad: a woman, the wife, lovingly thrust a breaded fish into the poet's mouth. The fish smells obnoxiously, opening the hood memory in his mind of the dead body of a woman rolled to the shore by the ebb, breaded by sand. The poet's heart beats in his mouth. Both the experiences leave a bad taste in the mouth.

The use of seven-line stanza is known as rhyme royal and also noticeable in his poetry. He uses the rhyme royal without any emphasis on rhyme or rhythm supports the poem's disenchanting tone on the subject of death. Here is an example of his use of rhyme royal from the poem "Obituary":

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him,

(Obituary, 111)

Besides the use of the phonemes, the poet sometimes uses expressions, which give a sound effect to the meaning. The poem "A Leaky Tap After a Sister's Wedding" is overflowed with this kind of music. It is though more on the dropping tap creating noise and nuisance to hearers, the sister comes in for momentary comments; for instance, in the following extract:

Drop after drop
falls from its slightly incontinent mouth
like mallet touches
of silversmiths nextdoor.

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Our sisters were of various sizes,
one was ripe for a husband
and we were not poor.

(A Leaky Tap After a Sister's Wedding, 9)

Simplicity is its hallmark. The poet sees the leaky tap, and closely marks its notes, some being duller and some others higher and louder. The drops of water stop for a quarter-second. The falling drops of water remind him of the "mallet touches" of a silversmith next door working for his sister's wedding, but in a sweep of imagination he visualizes that they are possibly the "pecking" sounds of the summer woodpecker of the tree:

It is a single summer woodpecker:
peck-peck-Peck-pecking away
at that tree
behind the kitchen.

(A Leaky Tap After a Sister's Wedding, 9)

The poet and his sister were ever fond of hearing the shriek or writhing of a tree.

In the poem "Routine Day Sonnet" Ramanujam follows the Petrarchan form of sonnet consisting of an octave and a sestet. The sonnet is quite noticeable for its rhyme scheme aabb, ccaa, ddd, eee which creates a surprising effect. For example:

For me a perfectly ordinary
day at the office, only a red lorry
pass the window at two;
a sailor with a chest tattoo.
A walk before dark
with my daughter to mark
another cross on the papaya tree:
dinner, coffee, bedtime story...

(Routine Day Sonnet, 68)

The rhyming of "ordinary" with "lorry", "two" with "tattoo", dark with "mark", "tree" with "story", etc. is praiseworthy and fulfills the very purpose of melody.

Thus after analyzing Ramanujan's poetry in the light of Phonological devices it is quite clear that he is a conscious craftsman of language. He uses language like a surgeon with precision and accuracy. He employs and exploits all the phonological sources like alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, rhyme royal and rhyme-scheme to create musical effects. He uses the simplest words, mostly monosyllabic. There is something clinical about Ramanujan's use of language. Compactness and terseness are the hallmarks of his versification. To read Ramanujan is to start delving into a mine of gold, as he loads every rift with ore. In the words of Taqi Ali Mirza:

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The terseness of his diction, consummate skill with which he introduces rhyme and assonance into his verse, the sharply etched, crystallized images, and the disciplined handling of language make Ramanujan one of the most significant poets in India today.⁴

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