

A STYLISTIC AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF “SNAKES” BY A. K. RAMANUJAN

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ABSTRACT

A. K. Ramanujan is one of the most gifted poets ruling the contemporary literary forefront. He excels in both – the style and the structure of poetry. He is remarkably original in his art; creating his own style and structure and imparting an all new hue to his verse. The present paper endeavors to make a stylistic and structural analysis of A. K. Ramanujan’s poem ‘Snakes’ and to figure out the exquisite features of his poetic art through a deconstructive study of the poem. It will analyze the poem on the grounds of different linguistic devices like its lexical features, deviation, parallelism and foregrounding.

KEYWORDS: Lexical Features, Deviation, Parallelism, Foregrounding

INTRODUCTION

Ramanujan’s poetry is remarkable in its linguistic aspects. He is a master of creating marvelous pictures by dint of his superb technique. The way he deploys imagery, symbols and other rhetorical devices in his creations is par-excellence and strikes the most distinctive note in Indian English Poetry. A poem conceals more than what it reveals and it carries the most effective and delicately emotive use of language. While its rhythm and meter form its outer skeleton and distinguish poetry from a mere imaginative production in prose; the spontaneity, figurative expressions, imaginations and emotional elements render life to it. The two elements together serve the primary purpose of poetry – providing supreme aesthetic delight. Poetry is composed in a language that differs from the language of other literary genres to a great deal. As Levin remarks:

“Language of poetry is different from the language of other literary genres. Poetry consists of language yet produces effects that ordinary language does not produce. So poetry is language differently ordered or arranged. This would make it clear that linguistic analysis, when applied to poetry, would result in a grammar that is different from the grammar that a linguistic analysis of ordinary language would produce”

The present paper endeavors to make a stylistic and structural analysis of A. K. Ramanujan’s poem ‘Snakes’ and to figure out the exquisite features of his poetic art.

INITIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE POEM

‘Snakes’ is among the best poems of Ramanujan. It appeared in his first collection “Striders”. Through this poem Ramanujan gives vent to his mind that is ever obsessed with the fear of snakes. The poem begins on a note of anticipation with a forceful remark, “No, it does not happen when I walk through the wood”. This happens when he is walking through museums or libraries. Even in the petty objects he passes through, he is reminded of snakes. This is also a hint to the fact that snakes generally hide in the dark corners of the common places in the society. They take shelter in the museums, book shelves, glass-shelves, etc., The Poet says that the book of yellow vein, yellow amber would remind him of snakes, the book-shelves arranged in geometric patterns would remind him of snakes. His mind is never free from this fear.

Ramajujan's excellent skill for description is eloquent in the vivid detail of "the yellow vein in the yellow amber" or "the book with gold on its spine". The amber yellow, gold and the curves when thought together create an image of snakes.

The poet imagines the snakes when he thinks of the dust cones that twirl around the farmer's feet while he walks down the dusty roads in summer noon. He skillfully portrays the serpentine splendor when he writes:

“The twirls of their hisses
 rise like the tiny dust-cones on slow noon roads
 winding through the farmers feet
 Black lorgnettes are etched on their hoods,
 ridiculous, alien, like some terrible aunt,
 a crest among tiles and scales
 that moult with the darkening half
 of every moon”

The Poet compares the sporadic hissing of the snakes to the little clouds of dust that arise when a farmer walks along a dusty road. The snakes have the nature of twirling around one's feet and the dust cones create an exactly similar picture. The hoods of snakes have a kind of design similar to black lorgnettes etched on them. This has been compared to the terrible aunt sitting amidst the tiles similar to the scales that are regularly shed off in a fortnight.

The poem points out the touching truth, the truth of insensitivity and apathy of the modern society. The poor do not falter to face any level of danger for their bread. No doubt, snake-charmers take any risk only to save their families from starvation by providing entertainment or pastime to the rich. They create an attraction for the audience by coiling the snakes round their neck. This sight is scary for the children and entertaining for the elders. Here it appears that their lives are for the sake of snakes that are the source of bread and butter for them:

“The snake man wreathes their writhing
 round his neck
 for father's smiling money.
 But I scream.”

Different human reactions to the sight of a snake can be seen here. His mother has a religious feel for it and gives milk to the snake; the father takes it for entertainment and pays the snake charmer, but the poet screams at its sight.

The poet is often reminded of snakes when he looks at the braids of his sister. He is so afraid that he waits impatiently to see her hair trimmed and tied up neatly. The snake and the braid both have the nature of shining brightly.

Another reference is made to snakes, flies and frogs. The poet brings out the puzzled association of snakes with the family. The poet as a child does not get rest from the fear of snakes till they are killed. He dreams of stepping on them and pressing them to death.

“Now
 frogs can hop upon this sausage rope
 flies in the sun will mob the look in his eyes,
 and I can walk through the woods.”

The poet is calm and convinced that the small creature like frog can now hop on the snake body which now is just like a “sausage rope” and now even flies will swarm the look in his eyes. He is confident and is no more afraid.

LEXICAL FEATURES

Table 1: A Distribution of Open Class Words in the Poem

Nouns	Museum, Woods, Quartz, Aisles, Book stacks, Geometry, Curves, Layers, Transparency, Opaque, Vein, Amber, Book, Gold, Spine, Snakes, Twirls, Hisses, Dust-cones, Wind, Noon, Roads, Farmer’s feet, Lorgnettes, Hoods, Aunt, Moon, Cobras, House, ripples, Bodies, Sibilant, Alphabet, Panic, Floor, Mother, Milk, Saucers, Design, Brass, Snake man, Neck, Father, Money, Sister, Braids, Knot, Tassel, Weave, Scales, Pins, Hair, Night, Ghosts, Sadness, Play, Left Foot, Right foot, Clockwork, Silence, Walking, Heal, Belly, Nodes, Lotus stalk, Landsman, Spasms, Fear, Whiteness, Stain, Frogs, Sausage, Rope, Flies, Sun, Eyes, woods	77
Main Verbs	Happen, Walk, Make, Dwelling, Touch, Think, hiss, Rise, Mould, Come, Glisten, Lick, Uncurling, Writing, Gives, Watches, Suck, Bare, Wreathes, Writhing, Scream, Ties, Look, See, Listen, Clicking, Strikes, Slush, Turn, Rushes, Wring, Drain, Leave, Hop, Mob, Look	35
Adjectives	Yellow, Tiny, Slow, Black, Ridiculous, Alien, Terrible, Darkening, Basketful, Ritual, Tame, Little, , Etched, Brown, Ringed, Sibilant, Smiling, Knee-long, Gleaming, Score, Clean, New, Click shod, Green, White, Measured, Bluish, Water bleached, Scaled, Flat head, Plucked	31
Adverbs	Like, Round, Suddenly	3

NOUNS

From the above table it is obvious that the poem consists mainly of nouns, verbs and adjectives; the nouns being just double the number of the verbs. This shows that it is an object oriented poem. It mainly carries the different objects and images that constantly remind the poet of the snakes. Now, let’s see the nature of the nouns. They are mostly concrete- that is, they refer to physical objects- and only three of the nouns are abstract (Panic, Sadness and Fear). Furthermore, it is possible to divide the nouns into two rough areas of meaning, or semantic categories:

Table 2

Nouns Related to Human Beings	Nouns Related to Snakes
Museum, Woods, Quartz, Aisles, Book stacks, Geometry, Book, Gold, Spine, Dust-cones, Noon, Roads, Farmer’s feet, Lorgnettes, Aunt, Moon, House, Bodies, Floor, Mother, Milk, Saucers, Design, Brass, Neck, Father, Money, Sister, Braids, Knot, Tassel, Weave, Pins, Hair, Night, Ghosts, Sadness, Play, Left Foot, Right foot, Clockwork, Silence, Walking, Heal, Lotus stalk, Landsman, Spasms, Fear, Sun, Eyes, woods, Spasms	Curves, Layers, Transparency, Opaque, Vein, Amber, Snakes, Twirls, Hisses, Hoods, Cobras, ripples, Sibilant Alphabet, Panic, Snake man, Scales, Belly, Nodes, Whiteness, Frogs, Sausage, Rope, Flies,

The poem has a mixture of nouns belonging to the above two semantic classes. This could be said to account for the central theme of the poem: the association of snakes in human life in different contexts – spiritual, occupational and poet’s obsessive fear of them. The three abstract nouns: Panic, Sadness and Fear very well seem to connect the two semantic classes of nouns.

VERBS

The verbs used in the poem also contribute significantly to our understanding of the poem. The finite verbs can be clearly divided, like the nouns, in to two semantic categories: those depicting human actions and those depicting the serpentine movements. The human related verbs clearly show three different reactions of man towards snakes: the initial verbs like touch, think, look, dwell, watch show the curiosity towards the snakes; other verbs like scream, (panic) rushes, (spasms) wring, drain (fear), depict human fear for snakes; and the last verbs like strikes, slush, hop, mob, walk show the human Repercussion to this fear and final riddance from it.

The verbs associated with snakes like, Rise, Moults, Glisten, Lick, Uncurling, Writing (sibilants of panic), Gives, Watches, Suck, and Bare, depict the serpentine splendor dexterously.

The other apparent aspect in the use of verbs in the poem is their present simple tense. These verbs help establishing not the sense of immediacy but facts pertaining to all times – the perennial association of snakes with man.

ADJECTIVES

The poem is rich in the use of adjectives too. They are almost equal in number as the verbs. This justifies Ramanujan's adroit imagery. But it is striking to see that, leaving few adjectives of quality - Slow, Ridiculous, Alien, Terrible, Darkening, Ritual, Tame and Smiling, almost all the adjectives are used simply for physical description of things - Yellow, Tiny, Black, Basketful, Little, , Etched, Brown, Ringed, Sibilant, Knee-long, Gleaming, Score, Clean, New, Green, White, Measured, Bluish, Water bleached, Scaled, Flat head, Plucked – they only describe the colour, shape, size or number. This again may be complying with the purpose of creating vibrant images.

DEVIATION AND PARALLELISM

Fronting

The most striking aspect of deviation in 'Snakes' is the fronting of the obligatory adjunct from its final position to the initial position in the first stanza:

No It Does Not Happen
when I walk through the woods.

But, walking in museum of quartz
 or the aisles of book stacks,
 looking at their geometry
 without curves

 I think of snakes.

Here the adverbial clause that works as the adjunct has been shifted from its sentence-end position to the sentence-front position. One of the effects of this grammatical deviation may be the foregrounding of the subject clause '**I think of snakes**'. This intensifies and emphasizes the poet's obsessed fear of snakes.

Ellipsis

Ramanujan adroitly employs ellipsis in order to impart precision and brevity. This tool is taken up by poets in order to present a myriad of meanings in a small piece of writing. Some of the abbreviations of sentences by omitting some elements that are retrievable from the context present in the poem under study are:

- But, \triangle walking in museum of quartz
while
- \triangle ridiculous, alien like some terrible aunt
looks
- their brown-wheat glisten \triangle ringed with ripples.
is
- their gleaming \triangle held by a score of clean new pins
is

Figures of Speech

The chief figures of speech Ramanujan employs in the poem “Snakes” are simile, metaphor and personification. He commonly uses oblique expressions. What he says always has a hidden or secondary meaning.

- **like some terrible aunt (Simile)**

The snakes having black lorgnettes etched on their hoods and the scales on their bodies are compared to some terrible aunt wearing eyeglasses and sitting on the floor of tiles. The figure of speech is simile because the comparison is done using the word of comparison ‘like’.

- her knee-long braid has **scales (Metaphor)**

The shining braid of the sister is compared to the snakes. The poet considers the braid like snakes, as it has scales and it is long and black like snakes. Here the figure of speech is metaphor because the comparison is done without the use of any word of comparison (like, as, etc.)

- a water-bleached **lotus stalk (Metaphor)**

The body of the dead snake is now pale and it appears like a lotus stalk due to its faded green color – a comparison without any specific comparing words.

- frogs can hop upon this **sausage rope (Metaphor)**

The body of the dead snake is now inflated and appears like a sausage rope.

- they **lick** the floor with their **bodies (Personification)**

These lines present an **oblique expression** as the snakes are said to lick the floor with their bodies which is practically not possible. The meaning is that they clean the floor as they pass by – rubbing away the dust. Here the bodies are personified.

- for father's **smiling money (Personification)**

This is again an example of **oblique expression** as the money can not smile. Actually the poet wants to say that father gives away money smilingly without any difficulty. Here the money is personified to smile like human beings.

- my **left foot listens** to my right footfall (**Personification**)

The foot is personified here to listen like living beings. It 'listens to the left footfall' means the sound of poet's footsteps is audible in silence like clockwork.

The figures of speech he employs here justify the theme and the image-oriented nature of the poem. The poem conceals a lot more than what is externally visible on a general reading. Apart from the apparent meaning of the poem there is lot more that the poet says through the adept use of figurative expressions.

FOREGROUNDING

There are strong elements of foregrounding in the last lines of the first and the last stanzas.

- The last line in the first stanza, **I think of snakes** decides the entire meaning of the stanza that says the poet does not think of snakes in its natural habitats, but he does so in rather unexpected situations.
- The last line in the last stanza, **and I can walk through woods**, is a repetition of the second line in the first stanza. It redefines and reinforces the entire theme. When it occurs for the first time, it gives the impression that the protagonist walks through the woods, but doesn't think of snakes there. But when the same line occurs at the end of the poem, it depicts an entirely different meaning- it says the protagonist could not walk through the woods earlier until he killed the snake and thus freed him from the fear. Here we reflect back on these words in the second line of the first stanza and understand that he never walked through the woods then too.
- Three lines in the poem are shifted from their positions and are aligned with the end points of their previous lines.

or touching a book that has gold

on its spine,

I think of snakes.

.....

a clockwork clicking in the silence

within my walking.

The clickshod heel suddenly strikes

.....

a flat-head whiteness on a stain.

Now

frogs can hop upon this sausage rope,

Here if we note only the shifted lines – "**I think of snakes..... The click shod heel suddenly strikes.... Now....**" These lines tell the complete story behind the poem – the obsession of the poet with the fear of snakes... then his stepping over the snake unknowingly... and his coming out of the fear forever.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis put forth in the core lines of the poem shows how the linguistic features of a poem are directly related to its meaning; and in doing so we have upheld our initial interpretation of 'Snakes'. Of course, this is not the only interpretation which could be given to the poem. However, by using a systematic analytical technique like stylistics we can ensure that our interpretation is as explicit and grounded in fact as it can be. It is also highly likely that any other stylistic analysis of the poem would include at least some of these conclusions. We hope, then, that we have explored to some extent why a text makes us feel a particular way, and that we have gone some way towards furthering the importance of stylistics as a useful tool for interpreting literary texts.

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