



The liminal conflict in A.K. Ramanujan's *The Striders* and Self-Portrait

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Abstract

The present paper examines A.K. Ramanujan's poems, "Self-Portrait" and "The Striders," to explore the theme of liminality and the poet's search for identity. It investigates whether Ramanujan strikes a balance between his Indian roots and his Western diasporic experience. It tries to ascertain whether he is caught in the troubled waters of liminal conflict or whether there is some sense of belonging. The study further seeks to determine whether Ramanujan's conception of self is portrayed as fixed or as evolving, shaped continually by cultural and spiritual considerations.

Keywords: Liminal, identity, conflict, balance, self

Introduction

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929-1993), a prominent 20th-century Indian poet, wrote poems at a time when the question of identity started figuring in many works of literature. He hails from a Hindu Kannada-speaking Tamil family but has been comfortable with five languages. He has written in Kannada, Tamil, and English. The trajectory of his life takes him to the U.S., and he settles there. The different phases in his life probably contribute to his delving into his liminal state, which is reflected in his poems. His poems "Self-Portrait" and "The Striders" exhibit liminality arising from the existence in two worlds or the transition or attempt to accept a new state.

Arnold van Gennep, the French ethnologist and folklorist, in his seminal work "The Rites of Passage" (1909), uses the term liminality. He discusses it in the context of the rites of passage and provides three stages to explain the different phases in a person's social status. The three stages are separation, liminality, and assimilation. He also delves into studies of European folklore, folk literature and the practices of a living culture. The second stage of liminality, or of being in a threshold or in-between state, where the individual is caught between two statuses, denotes a state of ambiguity. Homi K. Bhabha adapted the idea of liminality in his "Location of Culture" to describe the cultural and psychological spaces. Identity becomes a flux in this stage. He identifies it as the "third space" where these identities turn to hybridity. One discerns this liminal state and the ensuing conflict in Ramanujan's poems. He examines his dual status as an Indian and a diasporan and tries to find his identity. Varatharajan writes, "His hyphenated sense of self- his imaginative existence between a here and a there- seemed to facilitate his entry into many cultural and historical realms."

Liminal Conflict in "Self-Portrait"

Unlike his other poems, "Self-Portrait" is a short poem. It throws more light on the personal aspects of the speaker. His identity appears to be in a liminal state, where the perceptions about himself vary from person to person. His *self* appears in other people's vision when they compare his looks with someone they know. His identity is lost in the identities of many people. So, how does he perceive himself? Again, fragments of his identity are seen through

different images. In the poem, he stands somewhere between his own identity and his perception of his *self*. It is the woe of a person who tries on many shoes. The yearning to have a personality is visible, yet it is hindered. His image is tampered with in the poem as

The portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

The signature, which is distinct and denotes a man's identity, here belongs to his father! The portrait is created by his father, and as it is customary for a painter to sign his painting, he puts his signature in a corner. Yet in the flux state, the speaker sees himself as a stranger, shadowed by his father and the others. A portrait reflects the outward appearance of a person. The father's signature on it confirms his Indian roots, but he has outgrown it and has entered new realities and is incapable of finding that old self. He is aware of the *laws of optics*; nonetheless, while looking at his portrait, he sees a stranger. Seeing a stranger in the shop window denotes alienation. He is not fully his *self* or the *other*. The mirror becomes the liminal space- he does not belong to either world. Seen through the lens of Ramanujan's life experiences, one can discern the Eastern and Western sensibilities vying for clarity and order.

Liminal Conflict in *The Striders*

Ramanujan's *The Striders* expresses the loss of identity quite well. Prakash Panda expresses the diasporan anguish as "The cultural values and traditions which they nourished and upheld for years suddenly became useless in the new locality... the anxiety of in-betweenness is a burden that the migrants have to carry on their backs as they persist in their constant search of a home, secure family life and relatively stable identities." (Panda 80)

Ramanujan's selection of an insignificant, small insect, like a strider, as the title of his collection of poems- *The Striders*- is interesting. Striders with their thin legs drift on the surface of water without drowning. The striders floating on the surface of water belong neither to the elements of air nor water, yet they continue to search for their tiny space of existence and identity in the world, which is probably a

mirage, as it is merely a reflection of the sky they see, posing the question of identity.

In the poem “The Striders,” A.K. Ramanujan renders liminality through the image of insects walking on water-creatures delicately poised between air and liquid, motion and stillness. This in-between state mirrors the poet’s own internal conflict, the tension between transcendence and embodiment, identity and erasure. Like the mirrored self in “Self-Portrait,” the striders reflect a self that hovers in fragile equilibrium, never fully grounded. The poem’s use of natural imagery to explore existential and cultural dualities reveals his preoccupation with the unresolved space between binaries, making the striders not just creatures of nature but emblems of the liminal self.

Ramanujan has always been attracted to spiritual concerns. Ramanujan’s poetry consistently reveals an attraction to spiritual themes, not through overt religiosity but through quiet, reflective imagery that probes questions of identity, existence, and transcendence. Bruce King explains the connection between the prophets and striders expressed in the poem as,

An association linking the ‘striders’ to ‘prophets’ is that Vishnu creates the world by striding through it... And, in another metaphor, to be one of His devotees is to be an ‘immersed one.’ Vishnu not only creates, but He is the one who stands still in the world of change. His devotees dive or sink into his depths. (King 64)

Does he yearn for the *sthithi*/fixed state of Vishnu? The stature of the strider gives it a sense of belonging, yet the strider does not belong. Like Trishanku, it lives in its own world,

This bug sits
on a landslide of lights
and drowns eye-
deep
into its tiny strip of sky. (Ramanujan)

Ramanujan seems to be in search of his “tiny” bit of self. He appears to make a compromise on that narrow strip of sky, a sky that is itself only a reflection, not the real expanse. This subtle image suggests a commingling of reality and illusion, of water and sky, substance and surface. Is it a balancing act? The poet treads delicately between two identities, negotiating the space between them in search of a golden mean—a balance between cultural, spiritual, and personal dualities.

The poem commences with the word “and,” which shows continuity and a hint of multiplicity; it is followed by ‘search,’ indicating exploration of *self*. Yet the ‘bubble-eyed’ indicates the transitory nature of a bubble and hence points to the short life span of a strider. ‘Stithi’ and ‘bubble’ seem to be juxtaposed to show the conflict for an identity. Nonetheless, Ramanujan seems to compromise when the strider drowns in his small strip of sky. The strider, having created a world of balance and grace upon the fragile surface, ultimately succumbs to that very liminal space. This moment can be read as a powerful metaphor for the diasporic experience: the construction of a tenuous identity in a foreign land. Is this how a diasporan experiences a foreign land?

The water bug, like the diasporan, makes a living on a fragile surface between real and reflected, home and host land. This image encapsulates the diasporic condition: the effort to maintain balance in a world of shifting identities, and the constant risk of that balance giving way. The strider must constantly balance in the flowing stream. One is reminded of the Buddhist concept of life as an ever-changing, flowing river. Life is depicted as a rushing, mutable current in which the connections between past, future, and origin become increasingly improbable, though they remain logically necessary in terms of causality and continuity. Ramanujan finds fixity in the simple water bug.

Conclusion

Both “Self-Portrait” and “The Striders” evoke liminal spaces through reflective surfaces that destabilise identity and perception. In “Self-Portrait,” the shop window becomes a metaphorical mirror, presenting the speaker with a distorted or alienated image of the self. The usage of “signed” shows that the situation is beyond his control. Similarly, in “The Striders,” the water’s surface becomes a mirror that blurs the boundaries between the natural and the spiritual, between motion and stillness. In both poems, the act of reflection does not affirm a stable identity but instead reveals a threshold space where meaning becomes hazy and is in flux. Through these meditative reflections, Ramanujan’s conception of identity emerges not as fixed but as evolving, constantly shaped by cultural, spiritual, and perceptual tensions. He seems to have found the “third space” of compromise.

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