

A RIVER BY A K RAMANUJAN

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THE TEXT

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars

TEXT CONTD...

**under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun
The poets only sang of the floods.
He was there for a day
when they had the floods.**

TEXT CONTD...

**People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows**

TEXT CONTD...

named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse

of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

TEXT CONTD...

He said:

the river has water enough

to be poetic

about only once a year

and then

it carries away

in the first half-hour

TEXT CONTD...

**three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different coloured diapers
to tell them apart.**

ANALYSIS

Ramanujan's narrator details the underbelly of the river that stays hidden. Visible now, are the bits of straw and women's hair that chokes the rusty gates of the dam and the bridges that are plastered over with 'patches of repair'.

The narrator remarks wryly that the poets who sang and they, who now imitate them, see only the symbolism of vitality when the river is in flood. With a few stark images is completed the picture of the river and its complexities which have been glossed over and ignored. Yet not to stress the merely the grim, unlovely angle, the poet brings alive the beauty too, which lies open in the summer.

ANALYSIS CONTINUED

In stanza two, the poet speaks of the river in flood in the rains. He was there once and saw what happened. The river in spate destroys everything in its wake from live-stock to houses to human life. This happens once a year and has been continuing for years in the same pattern.

He notes the casual approach of the of the towns people. Anxiously they talk of the rising level of water and enumerate mechanically the 'precise' number of steps as the water brims over the bathing places.

ANALYSIS CONTINUED

With a few stark images, the poet completes the picture of the river and its complexities which have been glossed over and ignored.

Yet not to stress the merely the grim, unlovely angle, the poet brings alive the beauty too, which lies open in the summer. The opening line immediately presents the main physical setting of the poem by mentioning the city of “Madurai.”