Chapter – 2

The Recurrent Concerns

Poetry is not written, it flows forth as a gift from a source deep within our soul. (Anon)

Questions about origins are decisive in Ramanujan’s poetry and to the lasting relationship that Ramanujan developed between folk literature, the vernaculars, and his insistence on egalitarianism in society. These are intertwined with his repeated reference to the idea of the mother and the father in his personal cosmology. The conflicted relationship with these is also shadowed in the contentious affiliation with his parents in his poetry. The figures of the mother and the father appear recurrently in his poetry adding another thread to our understanding of his work, both in terms of his split loyalties to his various languages and also in terms of the central role of translation in his work and life. Girish Karnad reminisces how Ramanujan was very upset with the cover of his second collection of poems ‘Relations’, where the publishers put a picture of Ramanujan on the cover with the embedded portrait of his parents on the forehead of the poet. May be it was the serious implications of heritage that the poet
objected to in this cover picture, but it is undeniable that relations-aunts, grandmothers, cousins, parents-figure largely in his works.

Ramanujan’s poetry collection seems to trudge along the memory lanes of family, beliefs and history. Ramanujan is very efficient in evoking the warmth and togetherness of Indian family and the long remembered relationships, with equal mastery to show conflicts and the arguments too. He also masters in presenting the apparently glorious Tamil cultural heritage.

Expatriation is considered to be a breach or a rift between the self and its home that is beyond repair. Poets like A.K.Ramanujan, like R.Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar and Jayanta Mahapatra turn inward to get into his roots. His mind seems to be perpetually busy probing the areas of strength and weakness of his Hindu heritage. This is because his physical displacement has given a strong focus to his Indian experience so that the poems evolve as a sort of microcosm of his family history. In the words of R. Parthasarathy,

Ramanujan’s repossessing, through his poetry, of the past of his family and of his sense of himself as a distillation of that past is to me a signal achievement and one that was to be of value to other poets who are looking for a kind of poetry to teach the use of their own voice. (192)
Ramanujan refers to his past and goes to his origin and creates poetry out of it. He follows up an intimate insight until it manifests itself in a poem that is a world in itself. In “Small Scale Reflections on a Great House”, in spite of the ironic stance, the poet tries to develop the image of the joint family. Though he remains silent about any absolute analysis, he criticizes the breakdown of the system. The poet’s desire is to bring focus to the possessive, all embracing nature of the house that shelter and supports the joint family. Every nation protects its people, their customs, languages and values. It also possesses its people with such conviction that people cannot think of surviving without their national identity. What ‘home’ suggests to an individual at microcosmic level, the nation extends to its people at the macro cosmic level. In Ramanujan’s poetry, we observe the various nuances of the metaphor, home. From the beginning to the end of the poem, the house-image has been gradually developed, and it keeps alluding to the possessive nature of the Great House:

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things come in everyday
to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago. (96)

Everything ‘lost long ago’ surfaces in the speaker’s memory with a touch of nostalgia and pathos. In a traditional Hindu joint family, the
constituent members are lineal descendants as well as collateral within three and at times even four, degrees of relationship. Economic assistance, refuge in situations of crisis, the upbringing of children are some of the benefits put forward by the joint family. The relationships, however vague and distant they may be, are important, and therefore each person is sure of his or her respective position in the family institution. This poem supports the Frostian idea that “Home is the place where, when you have to go there/they have to take you in” (Tyler 165). The traditional Hindu joint family has sustained for centuries the health of the society. Parthasarathy states that “The family is, for Ramanujan, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks” (189).

The ancient house of Hindu heritage has synthesized intricate relationships into a compact whole. Such a house could also stand for the poet’s own store house of memory, retaining, nurturing and designating anything/anyone that seeks admission into it. The poem lists the ordinary, day-to-day events in a semi-humorous manner.

Neighbour’s dishes brought up
with the greasy sweets they made
all night the day before yesterday
for the wedding anniversary of a god,
never leave the house they enter,
like the servants, the photographs,
the epilepsy's in the blood,
on-in-law who quite forgot
their mothers, but stay to check
accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces,
or the women who come as wives
from the houses open on one side
to rising suns, on another
to the setting, accustomed
to wait and to yield to monsoons
in the mountain’s calendar
beating through the hanging banana leaves.(96-97)

Though joint families of urban middle-class have fallen apart, the basic structural relations have remained intact. As Richard Lannoy observes, “The ancestral home remains not merely a symbol, but the heart of a family’s sense of identity” (87). Ramanujan suggests by his ancestral home that a man cannot free himself totally from family as it means the loss of his identity. A man carries the family structure with him wherever he goes. Home is a dynamic centre of culture. But it also becomes a hub of routine life. It does not offer any excited living, but it provides a course of life characterised by family traditions and customs.

‘Small –scale Reflections on a Great House’ deliberately avoids growing into a family chronicle. Instead, it reveals parallels between the
family’s fortunes and the modern social history of middle-class and upper-caste India as a whole. The work assumes the status of turning into a national allegory. According to the allegorical argument of the poem, in the house that resembles the nation, ‘nothing that comes in ever goes out’. Everything inside circulates and re-circulates over long periods of time. And despite the noise of confusion, nothing ever gets lost. In other words, the economy of both household and nation is controlled by a complete balance of means and ends, or what figuratively might be called the ‘law’ of the material and moral ‘conservation of energy’. Upholding the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies that are typical of Ramanujan’s social poetry, this poem presents one of the most indelible impressions of ‘national portraits’ of modern India that we come across in twentieth-century poetry.

The poem “Looking for a cousin on a swing” also is predominated by familial relationships. The poem refers to a village swing; a favourite sport site for the cousins, a girl of four or five years and a boy of six or seven years of age. The picturesque rural backdrop with the swing is cherished by both the cousins maturing a romantic longing in the years to come when they depart from each other. With this familial possibility and intimacy and the shared innocence of the cousins help them scale romantic experience. The sweet relationship is built-up with

Every lung of the swing
she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling; (19)

The swing that keeps them alienated from the ground and lifted towards the sky through a tension of upward and downward rhythm foregrounds a sensuous experience beyond the boundary line of childhood innocence. The little girl is no more a child and

Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it (19)

Not only has the inclination for sex changes in content with adulthood, but the analysis of what occurred in the past has changed with regard to new experience and knowledge. It also shows the typical socio-cultural consciousness of guilt that is disturbing her because she secretly nurses a lust or incestuous feeling for her cousin. Ramanujan’s poetic character reminisces the physical context of childhood and equally finds the involvement of body/mind in their seemingly insignificant actions in the lines:

Not only on the crotch of a tree
that looked as if it would burst
under every leaf
into a brood of scarlet figs. (19)

K.N. Daruwalla writes “Cousin on a swing” is bursting with sexual feelings. The sexuality is omnipresent but its identification came late with the maturity of psychological insight; it is a saga of desire, of imaginary identities” (33). Childhood love blossoms into adulthood concern in an another poem of Ramanujan, “Love Poem for a Wife, I.”

“Love Poem for a Wife, I” seems to be a sequel to John Donne’s meta-physical poem “The Good Morrow.” While the lover in the latter repents that their life was like a long slumber in the “seven sleeper’s den” before they met, Ramanujan is seen equating the apathy and the unhappiness in their married life to their unshared childhood. “Love Poem for a Wife, I” appears to be a page from his personal diary where he has recorded meager feuds, misunderstandings and what not. The sharpness of the experience lies in the poet’s efforts to find the source of this unhappy situation. The poem echoes T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock” because it also makes a presentation of the psychological problems, hypertension and familial disorder due to which the couple is trapped in their own personal space as shown by T.S. Eliot. Just as Charles Lamb’s dream is shattered at the sad revelation of a fact that his dream children are only fictitious beings, Ramanujan in this poem also expresses the same disappointment with his marriage. He alludes to various myths pertaining to marriage if only any of those were followed,
imagining that their conjugal life would have been one of comfort. “Love Poem for a Wife I” summaries its memories of shared family relationships and a common heritage:

Really what keeps us apart
at the end of years is unshared
childhood. You cannot, for instance
meet my father. He is some years
dead. Neither can I meet yours:
he has lately lost his temper
and mellowed

slapping soap on his back;
find sources for a familiar
sheep-mouth look in a sepia weeding
picture of father in a turban,
mother standing on her bare
splayed feet, silver rings
on her second toes; (65)

The poem begins with the difference between husband and wife, through the image of unshared childhood, and progresses through patterning of other differences. At the end of the poem he suggests a hypothetical solution to this problem of ambivalence. The solution has
been casually and tentatively presented, that a traditional belief in child marriage does not guarantee conjugal happiness.

Sharing childhood in child-marriage thus does not ensure harmony of relationship between husband and wife in later years. Similarly, in “Love Poem for a Wife, 2” the poet shows the difference between himself and his wife who sports always a ‘changing syriac face.’ In spite of her anger, the poet has no hesitation to lose his identity and become ‘androgynous as a god’ (84). Ramanujan, in the course of reflecting the diverse aspects of his relationship, touches on other individuals of the family, and on social rituals and institutions too.

Ramanujan’s passion with the family theme extends its bearing on another poem titled ‘Extended Family’. While juxtaposing two sets of value–based objects, he maps out the inevitability of his return from the margin to the centre which is rooted in his own native culture.

Yet like grandfather

I bathe before the village crow

The dry chlorine water

my only Ganges

the naked Chicago bulb

a cousin of the Vedic sun

slap soap on my back

like father
Like mother

I hear faint morning sun. (169)

Even if he ‘bathes’ like his grandfather, he is deprived of the insincerity of the bath in the ‘dry chlorine water’ in the absence of the Ganges water. He slaps soap on his back like his father. But he dries himself with an ‘unwashed towel’. Like his mother he listens to the morning song which is faint. The poet thus recalls the experience of his grandfather on one hand and imagines his great-great grandson too.

Like my great

great-grandson

I am not yet

may never be

my future

dependent

on several

people

yet

to come (170)

Ramanujan seems to have been haunted by the images of his mother and father. The past memory takes him back to the days when he left for U.S. The past feels that his family relations are not just simple and
direct blood connections. They appear to be imaginative, speculative, complex and distant as in “On the Very Possible Jaundice of My Unborn Daughter”. The reference to jaundice is misleading. It only signifies the yellow tinge of the rays of the sun presented as the image of the sunflower and of the daffodils flapping in grandmother’s hands.

Father sits with the sunflower at the window
deep in the yellow of a revolving chair,
fat, bilious, witty, drawing small ellipses
in the revolving air. (14)

The pigment spread out “from the sulphur mines of the sun”. Father sits basking in the beauty of the sunflower. It is a typical Indian scene. An unbreakable link in the family lineage is thus suggested directly. And it stretches to the extent of referring to the unborn daughter. The poet fears a diseased future of his unborn daughter. He imagines that she might inherit the ‘jaundiced legacy of his parental home. The poet worries that yellowness all around his ancestral home might cause jaundice to the unborn daughter congenitally. The poet fears that a healthy and benign life may become impossibility to his unborn daughter.

Ramanujan frequently refers to the most important aspects of the past. He talks about his grandfather as well as his unborn daughter. This, Parthasararthy considers as Ramanujan’s seminal achievement: “Ramanujan’s repossession, through his poetry, of the past of his family
and his sense of himself as a distillation of that past is to me a signal achievement” (192). In ‘Some Relations’ he says that as human beings, all his relations are inextricably linked with primordial animals:

My daughter’s daughter’s unborn face
floats to the surface: it has the natural piety of the praying mantis after a kill, its own or a butterfly’s –
all over me are greenish
soft underbellies of ancestral
crocodiles and tortoises
the silent thud of their blood beat
-yet I do not shudder
at the coldness of their blood. (101)

The poet alludes to entire evolutionary process. And in the attempt the poet presents himself as the ‘distillation’ of the past. In “Some Relations: nursery turtles”, the poet reveals the discomfort of the daughter in an alien landscape.

Grounded here, carrying a daily cross
of window bars, an ordinary square
of sun, glowing and dimming with each
cloud up there:

My daughter’s turtles try
to hibernate in the jar, very far from the ocean,
beginning to be confused by the heat of this Chicago winter.(101)

Just like the turtles, the daughters have to bear the burden of many cultures as she observes life from the narrow window of a Chicago apartment. When the turtles were put in the jar, they were confused by the heat of this Chicago Winter because they were alienated from their natural habitat. Similar to these turtles, the daughter has to bear with many irregularities around. The poet reflects the anxiety of a father who is much concerned about his daughter’s welfare.

The daily routine of the poet begins with “a walk before dark with my daughter” and ends with a bed-time story. He writes:

A walk before dark
with my daughter to mark
another cross on the papaya tree;
dinner, coffee, bedtime story
of dog, bone and shadow. A bullock cart
in an Eskimo dream. But I wake with a start
to hear my wife cry her heart. (68)

The image of ‘bullock cart in an Eskimo dream’ concisely and clearly sums up the bi-cultural mind scape of the daughter. The emotion of love takes a heavy toll on clock time. The moments of separation appear rather long, and the moments of meeting too short. Similarly the
ageing of the beloved remains ever young to the ‘purple-eyed imagination’ of the lover. In his poem “Love 4: What he said, to his daughter”, Ramanujan reasons out the big difference between the lover and the beloved by citing the example of Pierre Bonnard who “always painted his wife/as thirty six/……./till she was seventy three” (227). Also he takes initiatives to convince his eighteen years old daughter who happens to love a seventy years old man through his own example thus:

I said, forgetting

at sixty three

that all the women

I’ve ever loved

have stayed eighteen

forever. (227)

The poet looks at the scaly braids of his sister which reminds him of his family and relations in his poem ‘Snakes’. The memory depicted in this poem carries him back into the world of his childhood inhabited by his father, mother and sisters.

Sister ties her braids

with a knot of tassel.

But the weave of her knee-long braid has scales’

their gleaming held by a score of clean new pins.

I look till I see her hair again.
My night full of ghosts from sadness
in a play. My left foot listens to my right foot ball
a clockwork clicking in the silence
within my walking. (5)

There are layers of memory relating to home and family. The poet
recalls the picture of mother who used to give milk to snakes in saucers
and the snake man there upon looked “for father’s smiling money”. The
sister’s knee-long braid clasped together by a score of clean new pins
reminds him of the scales of a snake. Images of family members thus are
evoked now and then even when he was dealing with an abstract feeling.
The poet remains tranquil initially. But on seeing a small creature like
frog which now hops on the serpent the poet screams at this sight. The
poet clearly depicts the visual splendor.

The twirls of their hisses
rise like the tiny dust-comes 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. (4)
The critic, Bruce King, has supported this poetic feeling in his own words:

The poem presents an image, a complex of feelings, distilled memories and events which are not elaborated or commented upon. But as it begins in the present ‘now’ of museums of book stakes which contrast with rural India and family liberation from the fear of the past, ‘ghosts’ from which Ramanujan now feels safe. (213)

The braids remind the poet of glossy snakes. And snakes stands for archetypal images which signify deadly sensuality and hidden sexual motives. In women-centric folk tales, snakes are often lovers or husbands. Girish Karnad’s play *Naga-mandala* has its source from the oral tales, usually narrated by women. *Naga-mandala*, a play with a cobra is, as Karnad says in his note to the play, based on two oral Kannada tales he had heard from his mentor friend and well-known poet, translator, philologist A.K.Ramanujan to whom Karnad also dedicates the play. Like Ramanujan, Karnad too explores into the ideologies that constitute the private domain of ‘family’. The play highlights the problem of woman’s sexual desire, autonomy, fulfillment and transgression. According to Karnad, *Nagamandala* is the story of a young girl in the circumstances of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two different roles— as a stranger during the day and as a lover during night.
Ramanujan delineates out the discrimination of the society against daughters. In ‘Entries for a catalogue of Fears’ he refers to the fears of a middle-aged father about daughters growing in age. Instead of finding fault with the “men in line behind his daughter”, the parents impose all kinds of stringent measures on daughters:

They’ll serve a sentence
without any term
and know it only dimly
long afterwards
through borrowed woods
and wrong analyses. (89)

Ramanujan points out the absurdity of punishing the daughters without any reason. He also exposes those who justify their actions with wrong analyses. Instead of creating a favourable atmosphere for the upbringing of women, the society suppresses their freedom in the name of tradition.

The mother, son, cousins all appear in the poem ‘Ecology’ and a contrast is drawn between the son and the mother. The son does not like the Red Champak trees bursting into flowers. It is made clear in the very beginning of the poem:

The day after the first rain
for years, I would come home
in a range,

for I could see from a mile away

    our three Red Champak trees

had done it again,

    had burst into flower and given mother

    her first blinding migraine

    of the season (124)

The son here is angry at the trees that give his mother migraine. The Red Champak trees can be compared to Shelley’s ‘West Wind’ where the west wind, like the champak trees, has a double role. Shelly states:

    Wild spirit, which art moving every where

    Destroyer and preserver, hear, oh, hear! (89)

Ramanujan’s tree is equated with Shelly’s West Wind. Besides, the tree helps us remember about Dylan Thomas’s force. The tree is ‘the force’ in Dylan Thomas’s poem ‘The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower’

    The force that through the green fuse

    drives the flower

    drives my green age; that blasts

    the roots of trees

    is my destroyer.(26)
The red champaks near the house used to give her blinding migraine and yet she would not allow anyone to cut the trees for they offer flowers for her gods, daughters and granddaughters too. The blinding migraine does not infuriate her but enlarges her sympathies and affections. Like the mother character in Ezekiel’s ‘Night of the Scorpion’ she, too, suffers patiently but wishes others happiness.

The family poems naturally present a wide range of personalities. “The Opposable Thumb”, is about an unpleasant incident that took place “one Sunday morning half a century ago”, yet the poem is closely connected with the poet’s family. The poem begins with a blind boy who has six fingers. Then it introduces muslin weavers with four fingers. And finally it describes Granny’s just solitary finger because the other four fingers were knifed by the ill-tempered husband.

One two three four five
five fingerspans for a woman’s blouse
said the muslin-weave spanning
but he found his span shorter by a thumb
    a puckered stump, sewn like a sausage head
    by a barber, without a nail
    phalanx or rice-grain line,
Instead of the usual casual opposable thumb
Said my granny, rolling her elephant leg
Like a log in a ruined mill:

............................................................

No longer usual, casual, or opposable after her husband’s knifing temper one Sunday morning half a century ago. (6)

Relations within the family are not just simple and directly related blood connections but complex and distant too. Ramanujan's poetry is profoundly autobiographical and replete with nostalgia. His memories of the past, especially of his relatives, figure in his poems most prominently.

“Of Mothers, among other things” is one of the finest poems bringing out the poet’s enduring relationship with his mother. The pitiable condition of an aged mother is impressively presented with the skillful touch of an imagistic painter.

her hands are a wet eagle’s

two black pink-crinkled feet,

one talon crippled in a garden - trap set for a mouse. Her sarees do not cling; they hang, loose

feather of a onetime wing. (61)

The poet’s erstwhile memory, akin to that of a “twisted backbone tree” recalls the rosy picture of his mother in her youth. Once she was active and she was fond of her children too.
From her earnings three diamonds
splash a handful of needles
and I see my mother run back
from rain to the crying cradles.( 61)

The poet states that the rain broke the tree-tasseled light into rays. The rain may suggest the changing fortunes of life. The effect of age tells upon his mother who appears like a lean wet eagle. Her fingers become disabled and they are too weak to pick up a grain of rice from the kitchen floor. This pathetic condition affects the poet so much that he considers his tongue dried up like a parchment tasting of bark in his mouth.

The poems showcases that the poet’s mother’s need to be considered together in order to understand the poet’s attachment to the past and to the family. “Still Another for Mother” describes a short flash back where the poet observes an argument between an aged American couples on Hyde Park Street in North America. The poet is immediately reminded of a similar incident involving his own parents:

Perhaps they had fought
worse still, perhaps they had not fought
I discovered that mere walking was polite
and walked on, as if nothing had happened
to her, or to me:
Something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly,
like the heavy door
of my mother’s black-pillared, nineteenth century
silent house, given on her marriage day
to my father, for a dowry. (15-16)

Here, the conflict between a man and a woman is shown. The man is angry and the woman pathetically urges him to forgive her. It may be an objective scene or he may indirectly refer to his own past. There is also a possibility of his envisaging a future where strained relationship would become a common spectacle. All the members in Ramanujan’s poems are caricatured except his mother. The poet’s otherwise rude and tough attitude is checked by the presence of his mother. In “Returning” the poet is in search of his mother in his sixties. The ending of the poem is poignant.

Where are you? I’m home! I’m hungry!

But there was no answer, not even an echo
in the deserted street blazing with sunshine.

Suddenly he remembered he was now sixty one
and he hadn’t had a mother for forty years. (14)

The poet being away from his mother land thinks of his mother who had died years ago. The extraordinary relationship with the mother
comes to the fore in a poem entitled “Farewell”. This poem transcends all the conventional meaning of the word ‘farewell’ because he talks about a different farewell which involves no feelings. Usually there are different types of farewell. First, there is a usual farewell drama at railway stations, when “standing/at the window of your friend” (7), one waits for the delayed train to come on the platform. Then there is “that recurring farewell/to the lady president/of the cooperative society” (7) when colleagues present her a silver medal but forget to inscribe her name over it. There is yet another type of a dramatic farewell:”farewell/of the dying patriarch/among all his clan” (8). The death of the grandfather in a family also has its typical setting:

Mother crying into her sari, father busy on the phone
trying to locate brothers
on trains that do not arrive
according to the time changes in April. (8)

It is only mother’s farewell where sentiments flow without verbalization. When mother takes “a long look/that moved on your body/from top to toe” (8) the possessive; maternal gaze is counter-poised with the moment of his farewell. She bids her son farewell “with the advice that you should/not forget your oil bath/every Tuesday/when you go to America” (8). While understanding the sincerity of mother’s emotions, the poet as the departing son also ridicules her for being too
fussy about referring to taking “oil bath/every Tuesday” (8). In Ramanujan’s poetry, the nationalist ideal of motherhood is indicated. Motherhood in general stands for purity of response. But this purity is too much for the poet to bear. Instead of extolling his mother’s purity, it is her naivety that the poet is fond of. One feels humorous, when the mother advises expatriating son to observe daily rituals which cannot be missed.

For the poet, the mother is a lingering presence, but her immortality is no cause for celebration. After her death she makes a comeback in the form of a tooth ache which the poet suffers in his left jaw. This ache reminds him of the same kind of pain which his mother had suffered just before her death:

……… it’s mother again
complaining of the large tooth
in her left jaw
the week before she died (259)

Mother is both a pain and a pleasure to remember. Though she is ignorant, at times of difficulty she acted as a soothing balm. In a poem entitled “Pain” the poet equals his mother to

O god of Knowledge, busy wizard
of diagnosis, father of needles, dials,
and test tubes send your old companion here,
that mother of mothers, goddess though of ignorance,
send her soon so she can kiss away my pain
as she has always done. (274)

Ramanujan’s mother is a hard taskmaster and motherhood therefore in his poetry is not a bed of roses. Well-meaning mothers teach bitter lessons to their children:

Mothers smear bitter neem
paste on their nipples
to wean greedy babies (257)

Intelligent mothers, Ramanujan would conclude thus
give them an inexplicable
taste for bitter gourd
late in life (257)

A good mother is not meant to pamper the child. She has to discipline the child well. A mother thus gives both sweet milk and bitter neem. Whenever the poet thinks of her benevolent acts, he feels delighted. At the same time the painful measures administered by the mother are unpleasant to remember. A mother’s loving touch can heal his wound. But her tooth aches had resurfaced in the teeth of the poet at a later stage. What he means is a mother’s good health favours the children. If she is unhealthy, the children automatically inherit her ill-health. Similarly, a mother stands for freedom and human bondage. And these two aspects are both a blessing and a curse to the issues. There has been
freedom to do what one likes. At the same time, an individual’s activity is always controlled by an external agency, like that of a mother and the child resents parental interference, even if it is for good. Thus the poet reinforces the double edgedness of experience in Ramanujan’s poetic vision.

Ramanujan, despite his playful and subversive tendencies does not underestimate the power of the umbilical cord. The cord is a kind of attachment that engenders in him a sense of belongingness and maternal affinity right from the embryonic stage onwards:

A foetus in an acrobat’s womb,
ignorant yet of barbed wire
and dotted lines
hanger on in tenor of the fall
while the mother-world turns somersaults,
whirling on the single bar,
as her body shapes under water
    a fish with gills into a baby
    with a face. (149)

But what distinguishes Ramanujan from other poets who glorify motherhood is that his mother is extremely unstable, turbulent and mobile. A pregnant mother as an acrobat takes somersaults. The usual symptom if stability is missing. Also in the poem, instead of using mother
as a symbol of nation, with its different cartographic and cultural variations, the poet shows mother as signifier of world, extending its borders beyond narrow domestic bounds.

A woman’s body is compared to nature, and mother is often seen ‘as a flowering tree’. In his commentary of a very famous folk tale entitled “A Flowering Tree”, Ramanujan discusses on the relationship of flowering with mothering in the Indian context thus:

A tree that has come to flower or fruit will not be cut down; it is treated as a mother, a woman who has given birth. Thus the metaphoric connections between a tree and a woman are many and varied in the culture - A relevant one here is that words for “flowering” and “menstruation” are the same in languages like Sanskrit and Tamil. In Sanskrit’ A menstruating woman is called A pushpavati, “a woman in flower” and in Tamil, puttal (“flowering”) means “menstruation”. Menstruation itself is a form and a metaphor for a woman’s special creativity. Thus a woman’s biological and other kinds of creativity are symbolized by flowering (221)

The grandmothers, aunts, mothers and female cooks are the sources of the folk tales which are the cultural repository of stories and narratives of the community. Though the poet gains access to the early oral
literature, he feels that he could never participate in the events described. As he says in his short poem, “Why I can’t Finish this Book”,

Letting go

of fairy tales
is letting go
of what will not
let go
mother, grandmother
the fat cook
in widow’s white
who fed me
rice and ogres (260)

Perhaps, the poet longs for those people who fed him with myths and legends. According to the poet, memories are sweet once they fill our hearts with fine thoughts but the same memory becomes painful when the past or people who adorned the past are never with us. In fact the poet represents the universal agony that time is irretreivable and nothing or nobody, however close or cordial, is permanent.

Ramanujan describes a list of women, who like his wife, in “Love Poem for Wife I” have a complete sense of self. Everyone has a separate and an identity that the poet, with his split vision, can see but never acquire. Here, however they seem like phantom memories that the poet
attempts to hold on to in desperation. The difference between the women and the poet is emphasized in this poem. Ramanujan clearly spells out his dissent with the treatment of women in Indian society, and particularly in his own home, in “On Not Learning from Animals”. Here he points out the seeming difference between animals and humans:

Has a harem but
he is not tormented
by claims of equal time.

But then
I forged how troubled I was when I saw, at seventeen,
after quarrelling
with my father about my mother’s rights,
a female ape with black striped snout
sort out patiently
with her long hands, then
sniff, and lick lettuce leaves
clean for her lord
and master while he growled all through. (217)

The father is compared to the male baboon. The anger on behalf of the oppressed woman/mother is also shown. The expression of futility and his inability to intervene in or change the situation are also focused.
The father or baboon growls, the mother or female goes on serving him. And the poet is left helpless not knowing how to change anything.

While talking about the condition of women, Ramanujan draws comparison from the folk tales. He always associates the mother/woman with Kannada and Tamil. The grandmothers, aunts and cooks are associated with folk stories, and the woman as a whole is related to childhood. Thus the past memories keep coming to him. And he seems to recall to our mind Partha Chatterjee’s discussion of the position of the women vis-à-vis the nationalist movement. It appeared that women did not benefit in equal measure from the nationalist movement, because, the nationalist divided the cultural domain into the material/public and the spiritual/private. The West held a total sway in the material/public domain with its connection to modernity and technology. But the spiritual space got restricted to the domestic site. The private arena therefore became the female space and it was therefore declared India’s true identity. “The woman then was equated with native, indigenous culture; she became the true keeper of the nationalist agenda in the privacy of the home, assailed by Western/colonial claims” (Chakravarty Uma, 87).

Ramanujan connects and combines the role of native tradition and women in his work. Ramanujan’s elevation of the mother as the figurative container for all the indigenous and local elements of culture
evokes the familiar image of “mother India” and the mother is representative of the earth.

Ramanujan’s poetry shows, the elevation and the deliberate suppression of women. As Elleke Boehmer points out: “The woman figure stands for the national territory and for national values: symbolically she is ranged above the men; in reality she is kept below them” (229-47). The mother is Mother India (in terms of the nation) and mother Kannada/Tamil (in terms of language) – but in the end, she is unavailable to the poet. She is just not there when he needs her.

Father is an important relation in the construction of patriarchy. He stands for outer material world, which signified colonial influences. While working very much within the frame work of nationalist division of domains – inner and outer space between mother and father respectively, the poet makes his own adjustments and critical alterations. Despite all his disagreements, he could be seen grateful to the father for helping him to understand the tyranny of fatherhood/colonialism. In “Wobbly Top”, Ramanujan describes his relationship with his father as two “perfect concentric circles” on the fast moving wobbly top.

At times, the wobbly top father gave me
quietly, after we both had a tantrum,
suddenly begins to spin so fast it’s still:

every scar on its body now describes
a perfect circle within other scars’
perfect concentric circles, as in
a time-exposure of the sky (60)

The wobbly top – a gift from the father- is dear to the son. This gift stands for the pain that he has got from his father. But just as the cuts or turns on the surface of the top are invisible due to the fast rotation of the top, the unpleasant happenings between the father and the son are invisible on account of the passing of years. The top, therefore, stands for the memory of the father. Like the top, the memory of the father moves within the poet so fast that it appears still, it does away with its scars. The top as a gift illustrates the vastness of the relationship that is found between the father and the son. In other words, it is the father who gives his son, the occasion, the medium and the necessary means for disagreement with his son. This kind of relationship with the father ensures that in Ramanujan’s poetry, colonialism or western education is not totally undesirable.

In the poem “Obituary” the poet presents in an ironical tone the tragic effect on the family due to the sudden death of his father, causing repercussions on or affecting the whole family set-up. It is said that the tone is flippant. It is also mock-ironic. But it is merely to conceal his seriousness and the sharpness of his grief. He writes that the father bequeathed to his son
left dust on

a table full of papers

left debts and daughters,

a bed wetting grand son

named by the toss

of a coin after him a house that leaned

slowly through our growing

years on a bent coconut

tree in the yard.

........................

Being the burning type

he burned properly

at the cremation

as before, easily

and at both ends.(111)

It evokes sarcastic tone expressing tears and smiles. The ritualistic ceremonies and mixing of the dead person’s ashes in the Holy River etc. seemed quite meaningless to the poet, for he experienced a void that nothing can fill in. His father’s hopes and aspirations too died. No memorial was erected to record his achievements which are almost insignificant. Yet the poet anxiously tried to find out the two lines written about his father in the obituary column in scraps of newspaper.
This shows his interest in reviving his unbroken blood relationship or the last thread of attachment despite his tone of mockery regarding the nil achievements of his father. The changed mother, an existing symbol of his father’s death is indeed a sad remembrance of this tragic event that upset the whole family.

Generally poems written on death ends with a note of philosophical resignation. But Ramanujan just presented the situation as it is, in a realistic manner without any philosophy. There is a poignant undertone suggesting his father’s miserable position that left nothing to his son except debts, responsibilities and expenses for performing annual ceremonies.

The poet comes back to the centre of his own self to perpetuate the legacy of rituals in the absence of the father. V.S. Naipaul too echoes a similar idea “The Enigma of Arrival”:

We were immemorially people of the country side, far from the courts of prices, living according to rituals we didn’t always understand and yet were unwilling to dishonor because that would cut us off from the past, the sacred earth, the gods (351)

Unlike the nationalists, Ramanujan does not look upon his father as one who has no regard for Indian traditions and value system. The father was a strange bundle of contradictions; traditional to the core. Yet he was
very modern in terms of his intellectual outlook. He was a learned astronomer who firmly believed in astrology. This how the poet portrays him:

Sky-man in a manhole

with astronomy for dream,

astrology for nightmare; (134)

Ramanujan has explored the theme of family relationships in different ways, which gave him an opportunity to emphasise the creative use of English. He has probed into human psyche at various levels.

The alienation resulting from the gap between the persona and the real self is exposed by Ramanujan in his three Hindu poems. “The Hindoo……….” poems of Ramanujan show that the masquerade implicit in the traditional Hindu cannot provide steady defense to the self because this defense can never fully muddle through the diversity and profundity of inner life which is brought into play in the course of one’s encounter with reality. Being alienated in more than one sense, Ramanujan has employed the operational strategy of fusion “to sustain an integrated personality against a chaos of alienation” (Rao 121). Though he had descended from an orthodox Brahmin family, Ramanujan is doubtful about the god-fearing Hindu attitude. The Hindu philosophy which necessitates everyone to be unselfish failed to work on Ramanujan. He became so self-centred. He had two sides. The outer self was cordial but
the inner self was turbulent. It was also suspicious about traditional beliefs. Ramanujan did not reveal this secret self to the public.

The three Hindu Poems show the gap between the real and the apparent. The real self remains hidden behind the garb of the religion. These poems reveal the self-deception of Hindu whose outward quiet self-disguises the agitations he experiences at moments of crisis. The first of these poems, “The Hindoo: he doesn’t hurt a fly or a spider either,” dramatizes the speaker’s feelings of dejection. Here the poet—the speaker in the poem—bears both the name and the spirit of his grandfather who stands for the poet’s personal self.

It’s time I told you why
I’m so gentle, do not hurt a fly.
Why, I cannot hurt a spider
either, not even a black widow,
for who can tell Who’s Who?
Can you? Maybe it’s once again my
great swinging grandmother,
and that other (playing at
patience centre in his web)
my one true ancestor, (62)

The poet also recounts the adultery of his great grandmother who had developed an illegitimate relation between herself and the fisherman.
He skillfully develops the image of a spider and its web. The persona of the poem truly represents his great grandfather in his timidity and suspicion. The poet mocks not only at the Hindu concept of rebirths but also at his own self.

In “The Hindoo: he reads his Gita and is calm at all events”, the sacred scripture of the Hindus. The Gita helps him to have control over his senses. A Hindu who reads the Gita is not affected when he sees good and evil.

At this party heads have no noses, teeth close upon my heart: yet I come unstuck and stand apart. I do not marvel when I see good and evil: I just walk over the iridescence of horse piss after rain. Knives, bombs, scandal, and cowdung fall on women in wedding lace: I say nothing; I take care not to gloat. (79)

The persona has no envy in watching the lover’s kiss. But his tranquility is disturbed when he sees the innocent face of a boy which has lost its primordial innocence.

Yet when I meet on a little boy’s face the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat I choke, for ancient hands are at my throat. (79)
The third poem “The Hindoo: the only risk” points out the total acceptance of the presumptions of persona leading to the denial of what reality is.

At the bottom of all this bottomless enterprise to keep simple the heart’s given beat,

the only risk is heartlessness. (90)

The Hindu poems attest, through implication, that the mask that a persona wears cannot provide any consistent armour to the self, because it cannot cope with the variety and depth of inner life when it encounters reality. The mask may be looked at only to discover one’s self, to become aware that one need not be troubled by what one is. We can also consider in this context the remark by S.C. Harrex:

Ramanujan’s sketch of an Indian that eludes definitions – in which the past loses the present and both are changed by the future, an Indian which is not only a puzzle in itself yet in its cyclic progression affords a vague measure of self-recognition hints at attitudes of mind and areas of sensibility that mould and colour Indian writing. (137)

Like Mahadeviyakka, the celebrated medieval Virassive saint, Ramanujan attempts to use human and concrete forms “to express the ultimate yet intimate nature of the religious experience” (qtd. in Bhatnagar.M.K 132) in his poem “Prayers to Lord Murughan.” In the
eleven prayers the poet tries to contrast the imagery drawn from tribal life, a life that exists in harmony with nature, and the sophisticated shallow urban life that is at once mechanical, parasitical, characterised by pretense and fabrications. He is sad to see the loss of ancient ritualistic practices at the altar of Lord Murughan. Lord Murughan, like river Vaikai, has lost significance in a spiritually bankrupt world. Ramanujan regrets the loss of faith which is explicit very much in the opening lines of the poem.

O where are the cockscombs and where
the breaks glinting with new knives
at crossroads
when will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees
waiting for lightnings? (113)

The poem explores the psychological link between traditional past of Indian Psyche and the demythicised reality of the disintegrated, milieu makes a serious probe into spiritual expectations. The poet’s feelings towards the stagnation of the life he is living and a mythical tradition that he belongs to necessitates mixing of memory and desire. The poet adds prayer after prayer – all involving diverse situations from the existential flow of life.
Lord of green

growing things, gives us

a hand

in our fight

with the fruit fly.

Tell us,

will the red flower ever

come to the branches

of the blue print

city? (114)

Lord of headlines

help us read

the small print (116)

Deliver us O presence

from proxies

and absences

from Sanskrit and the mythologies

of night and the several

roundtable mornings

of London and return

the future to what

it was (117)
Lord, return us.
Bring us back
to a litter
of six new pigs in a slum
and a sudden quarter
of harvest (117)

The poem thus expresses the existential predicament of the poetic self in the following manner.

Lord of the last-born
give us
birth.

Lord of lost travelers,
find us. Hunt us
down.

Lord of answers,
cure us at once
of prayers (117)

The significance of the “Hindoo……” poems and “The Prayers to Lord Murughan” lies in the fact that in these poems the poetic self, during its search for self-discovery has been longing all the while for a certain stability in flux as a result of which the explorer understands the eventuality of attempting to grasping the “self through its relation to and
through its reconstruction of other lives and thus passivity become an essential precondition for the exploration of the self’s potentials” (Ramanujan 19)

Ramanujan, who constantly acknowledges his roots in orthodox Hinduism, struggles to fight against what is undesirable in his Hindu heritage. He cannot sever his link. Ramanujan finds the inner reality in an affirmative manner in his poem “Prayers to Lord Murugan”. Murugan is an ancient Dravidian god of fertility, beauty, love, and war. His twelve eyes and six faces are an ironic symbol of the multifaceted constraints of reality. In this poem, Ramanujan’s desire for veracity within his self is fulfilled. He comprehends, at last, that authentic existence requires no external motivation.

Ramanujan’s conception of history as a process with human subjects, who are anti-heroic, is most directly stated in several kinds of historical poems. History as a galaxy of grand royal heroes and warriors is de-glamorized by way of its contrast with ordinary personal experiences. In his poem “History,” the poet records “the historical sight of

….her two

daughters, one dark one fair,

unknown each to the other

alternately picked their mother’s body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut,
of diamond ear-rings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair, (108)

Filial love is only pretense. The daughters are only after wealth.
‘The Last of the Princes’, for instance satirizes these characters who are social types rather than unique individuals, and whose inter-connected life-stories can be narrated as a compressed, anti-romantic social history of a specific class of Indians. Here, the poet also invokes the grand imperial Mughal history only to subvert it in terms of the ridiculous present, the “two girls Honey and Bunny” of the last Mughal princess.

….go to school
on half fees. Wife, heirloom pearl in her nose-ring,
pregnant again. His first son, trainee
in telegraphy,
has telegraphed thrice already for money. (105)

The Anglicized names of the daughters of the last Mughal princes, their schooling, the son undergoing training in telegraphy denote the difference between the Mughal past history which is romanticized and the reality which signifies economic bankruptcy. So, history becomes a record of lies, because the truth of the present status is bitter.
“Lac into Seal: a kind of politics” parodies the canonical history which in its attempt to present a comprehensive reality ignores the minorities and the marginal. The poem which describes summer, for instance is constructed in terms of “a crow or two stropping/its beak on the back of a cow” (50). These-macro level traditional images of summer fail to identify what happens at micro level, under “the armpits of trees.” In the obscure space of armpits the poet discovers “whole rows of bead-eyed beetle laying/for days their bowels’ designs” (50). The emphasis on “armpits” and then on “bowels’ designs,” and the reference to the insects is Ramanujan’s well-known strategy of unfolding the excremental truth of life. These insects seek recognition by the state that:

all these beetles dream endlessly
of futures and seals of state
and signatures of brass
on their most casual turd
or that they will ever begin (50)

The insects need space. They too want to have “a taste for History”; they too want to be the subjects of “National Cause”. The poet is known for his atavistic poetic arguments disrupting common expectations. Ramanujan is not a poet of easy moral standards. He mocks at conventional morality. In Ramanujan’s strange universe, excellence in
human affairs is the result of compulsions, or hardships. It has nothing to do with the innate genius nature of individual.

In his poem "Figures of disfigurement," he reveals how some underlying handicaps, physical or mental, bring grace to the so-called graceful. A traffic constable is

Sick, disabled, twisting

through the bright days

the constable of the market traffic

moves only his left hand

in sheer agony.

Men in cars, women on bikes

admire the grace of his movements. (9)

Grace is a product of some internal sickness. In other words, those who are disabled are differently abled. Inability is not a liability. It is an asset, for it activates the creative self of the disfigured people. In fact, creative temperament is equated with a physical disorder that an artist suffers from. For example,

Arthritic, the painter

makes new kinds of strokes

from his shoulder

keeping wrist and elbow rigid:

The exhibit of his latest pictures
opened yesterday.

The critics raved

about his technique. (9)

It is not necessity but sickness, physical or mental that is the
mother of invention. Disease is strength. Those who suffer from epilepsy
undergo moments of ecstasy: He feels that loss of memory past may open
memories of the past. Similarly, the dyslexic suddenly may rise up to
recognition by deciphering a medieval dairy. In the nihilistic vision of the
poet, future belongs either to the diseased or to the deceased: "Timely
death/may gives away a heart/or an eye" (9). Equally success invariably
comes to the undeserving. Physical impairment is an introduction to
worldly wisdom:

The dumb and the colourblind rise

rapidly in politics, the born deaf

practice psychiatry as if

to the practice born; fingerless

Men become tailors for royalty,

painters, filigree workers in (CP 109)

Abnormal characters flourish in Ramanujan’s atavistic universe:
“fingerless men become tailors for royalty, stutters become salesman for
things like machine guns” (109). These are “Miracles of vengeful
reversals” – this is how the poet sums up the contemporary situation of
human existence. Ramanujan’s poetry has no theory. It comes to him not as naturally as leaves to a tree. One has to work towards it. He says:

I don’t really know. I simply write poems as they occur to me; I have to have no theory. It is true I have a number of poems which are obsessed not only with memories but with memory itself. Memory as history and myth, memory as one’s own past. The presence of the past in the way the present gathers to itself different pasts. This kind of concern can, of course, lead to the no more and the have - been and the not-yet all weaving into and out of the here – and - now. You have to find a way of bringing all these together and still not confuse or diffuse the form of the work. But this is nothing new. (21)

Ramanujan explains the vitality of his poetry in handling memory. He says that collective memory is available in history, in myth and in the personal, private memory of his own experiential past. Ramanujan also partly explains what T.S. Eliot in his seminal essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” discussed as the ‘historical sense’. It means the presentness of the past or the simultaneity of all times – past, present and future. With the help of collective memory, Ramanujan revitalises himself, as a product of a culture that has endorsed his Brahmanical, Hindu and South – Indian identity. But by the help of private memory
Ramanujan relocate his self that has been lost and found to be lost once again amidst the inevitable flux of time. Thus, the changed and the changing flux of cultures are pointed out. Each culture tries to help the two sides of a self. One side accepts things as they are. The other one challenges the rift between appearance and reality. This dichotomy results in artistic tension which centers around the truth of being faceless and restless due to the insurmountable and inconsolable nature of human life.

The themes of memory and forgetting are dwelt upon even in the essay ‘The Ring of Memory’, where Ramanujan explains how “in Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist conceptions of karma, unacknowledged past actions have a way of imposing their structure on the present…. Thus one’s deeds leave behind traces called samskaras, which persist in future lives, and vasanas or smells of the past. It is through these that the past structure is revived, whether in memory or in the workings of karma” (Ramanujan 48). For Ramanujan, poetry refers to the art of seeing as well as saying, because it enables him to return to the resources of memory to see things differently. In an interview Ramanujan has declared the importance of aesthetic writing which is being nourished by Indian culture. He is of the opinion that culture and civilization are the roots. They blind us back to our experience of early years. He says:

AKR: Because you cannot entirely live in the past, neither can you entirely live in the present because we not like that.
We are both these things. The past never passes either the individual past or historical past or cultural past. It is with us, it is what gives us the richness of what you call it – the richness of understanding and the richness of expression.

(qtd. in Rama Jha 5)

Though settled in America, the central theme of his poems evolves from a recollection of the memories associated with his Indian past. The memories are not merely recollected to reveal his sentiments, but are cleverly used to exercise memory itself. Caught between the opposing forces of Westernization and his own native tradition, Ramanujan’s poetry shows psychological creative tension. Exploring the psychological phenomenon involved in memory, Ramanujan points out:

According to the doctrine of vasanas – memory traces or smells-perception itself is half memory. One remembers because one sees a partial similarity between the object present and an object one has seen before. So one needs remembrances so that one may remember, recognize literally remember or reconstitute the object in front of us by reconnecting present impression with past memories of that object. (88)

The problems of bicultural situation form the nucleus of his self-analysis. A country’s colonized history would always inspire the creative
writer to abide by those strictures and traces which would help him seek his identity. As against the theory of acceptance, the poet’s other self would persuade him to resist hegemonisation. Our knowledge of history is an integral part of our culture. Culture also influences our knowledge, beliefs and values which in turn influence our comprehension process. It is a truism that without an impassioned adherence to the cultural memory, a creative writer cannot grow. He cannot enshrine a vision. He cannot persuasively express his creative medium or idiom. He cannot measure the immensity of his own being and becoming. Such an adherence is a creative writer’s inner need. It stands for an urgent and earnest compulsion to know the self. Ramanujan is fully aware of the limits of his cultural memory. And he incorporates that into his poetry frequently alluding to the Hindu beliefs, superstitions, legends and myths.

Ramanujan’s poetry is replete with the problems of culture, politics, and identity. Home is a crucial concept, both in the past and in the present, especially for Ramanujan who lived as an Indian diaspora. For the poet, the concept of home fulfills an important function in his life. It performs as a valuable means of orientation by giving him a sense of place in the world. It reminds him of where he originated from and where he belongs to. As an idea, home stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort. To be at home is to occupy a location where one is welcome, where one can be with people having same wave length. But this idea of
home as a symbol of closeness, integrity, solidarity and happiness is difficult for immigrants like Ramanujan, who live in alien lands longing to return to their own roots, because their journey impacts upon the way a home is considered. Imagination becomes more and more the primary location of home. But the mind is unpredictable. It is also at times Quixotic. Those who migrate can visualize their home in fragments and fissures revealing gaps and breaches. The immigrant arrives in new places with baggage, not only in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also in the metaphorical sense of cherishing their national beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviors and values.

When one force opposes the other, poetry is created which describes the personal trauma of the poet as well as the yearnings of collective memory which is celebratory, subversive or ironical. The recurrent concern that Ramanujan shows in his poetry is a nostalgia which cements human frailties’ and expectations wherever one is placed. He wants boundaries and borders to collapse so that a new world of togetherness, irrespective of cultures and races, can be envisaged.