Chapter 4

The Craftsmanship

They say it is hard to write a poem. It’s even harder not to write than to write. (Ramanujan)

Ramanujan was a linguist and therefore the study of languages becomes central to his thinking. It also forms the essence of his literary output, where his various languages and their traditions continue to interact with each other even when he is not translating from one to the other.

This profound concern with languages and origins can be interpreted as Ramanujan’s dilemma about his diasporic existence in Chicago and in Bangalore. It helps one to interpret Ramanujan’s existential angst. At the same time it ignores the regional factors that might also have influenced the poet to question his linguistic and philosophical choices. A brief reference to Ramanujan’s Kannada novella, Mattobane Almacharitre (“Someone Else’s Autobiography”) would illustrate the same. Here, the narrator, A. K. Ramanujan, meets a poet. The ensuing interaction between the two is one of lost selves, double identities. A. K. Ramanujan writes down his feelings about his divided self and says: “I don’t know why, but for five or six months, the
events of our three days in Madras still haunt me. From twenty years ago and so far away, all the little details continue to prey on me …” (214). In this semi-autobiographical sketch thus the poet hints at the recurrence of past influences and events in his work and in his life.

These obvious references to the divided self which abound in Ramanujan’s poetry can be interpreted not only as an Indo-American diasporic expression of the loss of home, but also as that of a Post-Independence Indian who has lived through the making and remaking of nation and home in the linguistic and literary revelations. It can be perceived in the context of Ramanujan’s stay in India during the creation of the state of Karnataka, the Kannada speaking state, and also in the context of Ramanujan’s travels abroad. Ramanujan connects the experience of living in multiple linguistic regions in India and living a diasporic life abroad in this same novella. Hence Ramanujan writes in his short novel: “When I think of those memories now, I agree, that for someone like me who had never left Mysore, Madras was another country. Though, I have hardly gone 300 miles, it felt foreign to me” (258).

Language plays a prominent role in Indian life. India is internally divided mainly by linguistic boundaries. And in Mysore, Ramanujan lived through the bitter struggle to establish the linguistic state of Karnataka in the fifties. The struggle was intense and bound to have
affected the people who lived in those regions at that time. There were many clashes between people who were narrow-minded and those who were diehard in matters of linguistic identity.

The national leaders refused to accept such linguistic division in order to foster a sense of unity in the new nation and to discourage divisive sentiments. In response to such ideas, the Kannada leaders instigated a long protest movement which included fasts and even acts of violence. In order to suppress the revolt, the British had tried to control the local, native language press which, according to them, was encouraging and fuelling the rebellion against the British Raj. The new Indian nation, in its refusal to recognize regional linguistic identities, thus came to be seen as a neo-colonial institution that still silences differences and otherness. And the concept of freedom struggle gave a double meaning for many Kannada writers.

Ramanujan lived in Karnataka when people were seriously fighting linguistic separation. Ramanujan knew Tamil, Kannada and English. The knowledge of these three languages enabled him to adopt translation as a medium of achieving poetic unity and identity. Thus, even before Ramanujan left Indian shores for the United States, he was facing challenging questions about national and regional identity and the difficulty of taking unequivocal stances on the issue of his own linguistic inclinations. Ramanujan’s works were influenced by this regional
process. However, his works expressed an opposition to the Indian identity in an individual manner. At the same time, they also reflected the diasporic concerns of a displaced Indian. English language served as a bridge that connected Ramanujan’s expatriate existence with his life in India. He was a teacher of English literature and this was also the language that he was encouraged to use by his father. In this crowded melee of languages in the country, English was supposed to form affinity between the writer and his world and also between him and his other regional cultures.

There were several issues regarding the introduction of English as a medium of instruction. One must remember this fact while reading Indian writing in English in general, but particularly the works of A.K. Ramanujan, who agonized over this issue in much of his work. Indian leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy believed that access to an English education would enable the Indians to re-examine many of their retrogressive traditions and also bring them closer to the Modern world with which that this language was associated. As Ricento says: “English can represent conflicting ideologies, at the same time in different communities - i.e., militant forms of cultural homogeneity in the centre and pluralism in the periphery” (qtd. in Patak 129).

English was becoming the global language of discourse in India. And one tried to achieve fluency in it in order to gain a prominence in the
world of commerce and capital. Despite this fact Ramanujan made use of rich materials from Tamil and Kannada poetry to signify distinction and originality in the body of poems in English which could act both as a resistance to English and as manifestation of nativity. S.C.Harrex describes the quality of Ramanujan’s creative medium.

A.K.Ramanujan used language with a surgeon-like precision, realizing that the secret of life is more likely to be found in the smallest rather than the most comic particles of existence….We should note under language that Ramanujan has evolved a personal pliant. English which retains its normal power of analysis yet is so internalized to achieve a resonance of Indian feeling and Hindu impulse. (155)

Ramanujan reverses Keat’s dictum of poetry and tells us that a poem comes not always as leaves to a tree, but differently one has to work on it. Taking black hen as a metaphor for a poem he says:

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all
yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye
on the embroidery
stich by stich
dropped and found again
when it’s all their
the black hen stares
with its round eye
and you’re afraid. (195)

Ramanujan’s tone and temperament drew the attention of the
critical over view of the people. His poetic height and perception
fascinated many critics. Bruce King states in this regard:

Ramanujan is widely read in India, along with Western and
Western influenced modern Indian poetry in Indian
languages. This unpredictable fusion of varied roots in
Ramanujan’s poetry is true of the attitudes it expresses. (20)

Ramanujan has a mastery of words and in his poems each word is
used adroitly, attentively, accurately and economically. In her stylistic
explanation Jayaprada comments:

On the basis of the stylistic analysis of Ramanujan’s poem,
one can say with confidence that he is a remarkable and
original craftsman. His predominantly nominal style, with
the use of concrete nouns wherever possible, renders a visual
quality and terseness of his poetry. (47)
Ramanujan has effectively demonstrated the foremost significance of having roots. Accordingly a poet writes sincerely by placing his focus on roots, his work acquires vitality. Ramanujan’s technical accomplishment is beyond debate. Equally, his thematic strategy is precisely the right one for a poet in his position. He has exploited the maximum opportunities his material offered him. Ramanujan’s poetic technique is critically examined by M.K. Naik:

In poetic technique, of all his contemporaries Ramanujan appears to have the surest touch, for he never lapses into romantic cliché. His unfailing sense of rhythm gives a fitting answer to those who hold that complete inwardness with language is possible only to a poet writing in his mother tongue though he writes in open forms, his verse is extremely tightly constructed. (201)

Ramanujan is very often extolled for “his unique tone of voice, a feature that accounts for the characteristic style of his poetry” (R. Parthasarathy, P-194). Poetry is not explicit story-telling. There is always “a deeper narrative expression” (Shapiro, P-5). Even the most fragmentary, discursive and subjective poem employs this as its basic frame of poetic argument. When this becomes a universal condition, the mode of narration itself can be called an archetypal pattern. And archetypes stand for communal consciousness. Poetry reflects self-
expression. Often these two poetic techniques – narration and self-expression do not converge but criss-cross in the revelation of artistic experience which is unique and special. To put it differently, there are two selves. They are the narrative self and the poetic self. The narrative self is communal or archetypal or general. It is ubiquitous in nature. It is found even in our day-to-day life. But the poetic self is personal and uncommon. It is autonomous in its essence. However, it gains recognition and authenticity only when it negotiates with the norms of cultural practices foregrounded in the mythical narratives of a specific culture. To ignore narrative is to de-historicize the self.

A.K.Ramanujan’s poetry makes use of folktales and narratives that he inherited from his native culture. He has been a compiler of folktales. And also he has been their explicator too. In his prose works too oral folk-narratives keep recurring in classical and modern narratives.

Ramanujan, as a poet, adopts the uncanny skill of postponing or prolonging the climax of his poetic argument. And when he unfolds the poetic climax, he teases his readers. He would not allow even a slight movement of progression go unnoticed. At every step forward, he would introduce a list of parallel images which verbalise his exclusive, unique experience. In “Highway Stripper”, the process of stripping has been
narrated graphically. It creates a powerful mental picture when the speaker appears to be

    Shedding
    vestiges,
        old investments,
        rushing forever
        towards a perfect
        coupling
    with naked nothing
    in a world
    without places? (166)

An intense gaze adds to the sustained description of the stripped bra:

    .....and off-white bra
    for smallish
    breasts whirled off
    the window
    and struck
    a farmer’s barbed wire
    with yellow-green wheat grass
    beyond
    and spread-eagled on it,
pinned

by the blowing wind (164)

The poet shows an exact eye for the shape, size and colour of the bra along with the details of how it is stuck in a barbed wire rendering ‘an episodic value’ to the drama of total stripping towards the end. There are many poems which if written in the prose form may approximate a short story. These poems have a proper narrative beginning, a dramatic situation, a short spell of suspense and a ‘sudden’ denouement. The poet does not rewrite the already exhausted narratives. He invents his own situations. Chirantan Kulshreshtha, a well-known critic of Indian English poetry, spells out the details of the use of narrative mode in Ramanujan’s poetry thus:

Ramanujan’s use of the narrative mode to render the nuances of particular experiences: his method generally involves the introduction of the specifics of an experience through a plain or meditative statement which grows into an image dramatizing as well as recounting an event through visual and auditory details. (113)

Ordinary situations of life are raised and given the status of short poetic tales, which serve as poetic allegories. Those allegoric tales have their internal processes and complex structure. They present life with all
its nuances. In such poems, Ramanujan, the story-teller, enhances Ramanujan, the poet.

“Backstreet Visit” is a story of a fear-filled poet persona who runs away from a Thai brothel centre along with his friend. The picturesque details of the story are as follows:

He put down cash, dollar bills, before the pan-chewing madam in the hills and then he, and I cowering deep within him, went into the bare room overcome with the jasmine scent of a bed under the bulb with a newspaper cone for a shade. The young woman, hardly a woman, her voice a whisper of laryngitis, asked him in her sibilant language, may be Thai, something he didn’t understand, then bent double to peel off her clothes. A brown almond turning her back to him as I watched down to her panties and bra that he was supposed to undo. A kitten mewed in the next room. She flinched. I felt in hurry and he vanished into my sweat and shudders. (19)

Ramanujan provides minute details of the experience to build up his poetic image. The entire drama of what happens inside the room of the Thai brothel is presented through poetic images which please the eyes and ears of the listeners/readers. For instance a “Whisper of laryngitis” and “kitten mewing in the next room” adds to the olfactory effect of the
poem. The “jasmine scent of a bed” does also bring out the sensuous nature of the incident. It is normally towards the end, usually in the last line that Ramanujan subverts his own poetic structure raised so meticulously in the beginning. Something happens in a “hurry”. And the hurried effort forecloses the possibility of a long drawn out climax of the narrative.

Ramanujan’s poetic practice thus derives its structural strength from the narratives available to him from various oral folk traditions. Folk narratives as indirect artistic resources help him sequentialize his complex and ironic poetic arguments. Similarly, the intense human concern of the poet facilitates him to get over the boundaries which literary genre set among them. In an interview he refers to the blurring of generic boundaries in Indian poetry thus:

I have tried to keep the human scene central in the poems the more I pay attention to the human world, for me the line between the poem and the novel, the lyric and the story, begins to blur; and anyway in Indian poetry there’s never been a clear line. Any single poem implies a persona, a voice, a specific scene, a whole dramatic situation. (47)

A poem thus parallels the process of a short story because the basic objective of both forms is to unravel the realities of human life. Ramanujan’s poetry as one organic whole shows the character of a long
narrative poem. It appears to be a modern epic in which every poem acts as a short narrative frame contributing to the making of a heroic verse. That Ramanujan’s poems are close to folk narratives; however, do not mean that generic boundaries disappear absolutely. There is an exchange of techniques or modes of articulation, across genres, but it does not imply that distinctions collapse. The choice of poetic form is not arbitrary. Here the remarks of Nirmal Verma on cross-generic literature are relevant:

The choice of forms cannot be arbitrary; it is inherent in the nature of the experience itself. We cannot transfer the same experience from one form to another without deadening its quick throbbing; once dead, it can be transferred anywhere, to a play or a poem or story; but it would be a dead play and a dead poem and a sad story. (156)

The folk narratives exhibit archetypes of consciousness. But they remain sub-textual to Ramanujan’s poetic enterprise. In their “Introduction” to Ramanujan’s “Essays on Folklore” Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes observe that “tales put culture in motion for him, stimulating his imagination, drawing his eye to detail, to structure…” (349). But they fail to displace his choice of poetic form for the articulation of his experience.
Ramanujan’s deep knowledge in Kannada and Tamil folklore, has shaped his inner cultural make-up. Ramanujan was good at the languages of folk consciousness. Sometimes he translated Kannada and Tamil poetry into English and at other time he did the other way round. Thus he had two circles; the inner and the outer. Both circles are not contradictory, but complementary to each other. Arvind Mehrotra states:

The movement is in his case from Kannada and Tamil into English and, as importantly, from English into Kannada. The languages Ramanujan writes in, those he translates into are ‘continuous with each other. (6)

Ramanujan’s artistry lies in his sensitive use of language which conceals the depth of his thoughts and the deft use of themes which substantiate his vision. By skilfully rising symbols and images the poet binds together the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner’ forms of his mind and imagination, adding a new colour and dimension to Indo-English poetry.

It has been observed that in Ramanujan, the image takes an upper hand over the idea the image. Parthasarathy(1994) maintains that in Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Mehrotra and Kumar, the image is not only the spring–board of poetic composition, but also the kernel of it.

Underneath the poems one can decipher the pattern in which they seem to think-the pattern of images. Thus, their basic means of expression is subliminal, and it lies below the threshold of language. The
images are primarily visual. Words tend to collocate together into an image which then triggers off the poem. The entire poem is, in fact, one image or a complex of more than one image. It is in this context that the use of the image is seminal. (9)

One can re-read “The Black Hen” in which the images are so tight that the idea which stems from one image gets fused into the other, without distorting their individual identities poetry must come as leaves

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

to a tree

or not at all

yet it comes sometimes

as the black hen

with the red round eye

on the embroidery

stitch by stitch

dropped and found again

and when it’s all there

the black hen stares

with its round eye

and you’re afraid. (195)

As in the case of Ted Hughes’s “Thought Fox”, Ramanujan shows the creative process in the poem. The black hen image is ripe in its
texture. This image is so powerfully used that it connotes the feeling of fear of one’s death. The narrative structure appears to be circular representing the subtle wearing of images. Ramanujan has used poetry as a unique and distinctive creative medium. In this rich tapestry of images, the singularity of past, present and future gets dissolved in a spectacular way. Once the process of composing poetry comes to an end, the ‘hen’ stares back at its creator suggesting that the product (poetry) is more powerful than the producer (poet).

In “No fifth Man”, the poet describes the parable of five Brahmins creating a tiger in different steps from thin air through their mastery of the sixty-four arts. The image parodies the very process and climax of poetic creation.

Poetry too is a tigress,
except there’s no fifth
man left on a tree
when she takes your breath
away. (245)

The idea of a creation threatening or intimating its creator is extended in another poem titled “Museum” (23). The poem “is a striking example of the poet’s view of creativity” (Daniels-Ramanujan, Molly 279). While looking at horses in a Chinese painting displayed in a museum, the poet is awe-struck by their utmost liveliness. The horses
look like prancing out of the walls. These horses take on terrifying postures as they are all set to “trample the flowers/in the emperor’s gardens/night after night”. According to Ramanujan, the artistic creation becomes so real and animate in a moment of climax that it stares at the face of its own creator.

In a poem, “From Where” Ramanujan discusses an unresolved issue. It is about how an image strikes a poet. The poem begins on an interrogative note thus:

when, well or ill, the task is done,

the images lose their spin,

lose their hum, as they wobble, roll, lie still.

I ask, where did they come from? (271)

“Task”, here stands for the act of poetic creation. The poet accomplishes the same by untangling a host of images that flash upon his inward eye. The poet is surprised at the way these images ignite his mind and go into the making of his poetic argument. The poet fails to exactly locate the exact origin of these images that take part in the act of creativity. However, he speculates on the type of poetry he writes. The images range from the terrestrial to the sublime, from “mice” to “murder”, from “Hitler’s packs” to “bangles/broken/on mother’s hour of widowhood”, from “kindergarten kites” to “first/thought of Human Rights”(271). Ramanujan’s poetry is a Kaleidoscope of colours, smells
and sounds leading to a deep understanding of the jigsaw nature of life. For instance, the mother image is quite paradoxical, because it is true that he felt the presence of his mother throughout his life. But he has never met or found an ideal one in his life.

In the poem, “Of Mothers Among Other Things”, Ramanujan uses imagery that recalls Pound’s famous haiku to depict the fragile durability of his love towards his mother. He composes:

I smell upon this twisted
backbone tree the silk and white
petal of my mother’s youth. (61)

His mother is excellently delicate and beautiful, but now everything is evanescent. Even beauty is impermanent. The poem opens with the image of the “twisted backbone”, of something which is hardened and hurt. But finally it ends with that of the mother who is like a wounded eagle, using her “four still sensible fingers” to pick a grain of rice from the floor. These are images of mutilation and damage. Yet they do suggest the industrious nature of mother who is beautiful but fragile. The rain affects the tassels of light. But this woman braves the rain and attends to the needs of the “crying cradles”. Her hand is damaged in a way that an eagle’s claw is, when it is trapped—but she can still pick up the single grain of rice from the floor with her partially disabled hand. This picture shows the pains taking nature of the woman. In using words like
“twisted”, “crying”, “broken”, “rags”, “black”, “crippled”, and “trap”, Ramanujan indicates the hardships she faced in her life and demonstrates that the mother’s existence is impaired. The poet wonders whether it is because of her being a woman in a patriarchal family. But she manages these encumbrances and tries to remain steadfast as the emotional centre of the family.

The poet is at a loss to fix the status and condition of his mother. Therefore he writes:

My cold parchment tongue licks bark  
in the mouth when I see her four  
still sensible fingers slowly flex  
to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor (61)

The image of the parchment licking bark indicates the desire to go back to one’s origin. Yet the actual act of the tongue licking the bark is something dreadful. The dryness in the throat comes from several sources or reasons: It may be from witnessing the painful yet perseverant effort of the mother with her damaged body or it may refer to the terrible realization that one cannot achieve anything by licking the bark. At the creative level, it states that the that the writing can never go back to the bark. And memories have to suffice in place of the real. The son turns to go back to a time when he had his mother with him; the husband wants to
go back to a time when he would be one with the past of his beloved wife
or, as Ramanujan puts it:

    the brain’s fold unfold
    leaves in summer, walnut in a shell
    longing for its mother tree (Ramanujan A.K 15)

But there is a realization in Ramanujan that this search is endless. There is no way of reaching the self-hood of the woman who is his mother. This sense of the loss is a predominant theme and sentiment in Ramanujan’s poetry.

In his much discussed poem ‘Striders’, the insect-a kind of water bug-is brought to life before us:

    ......thin
    stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs.

    See them perch
    on dry capillary legs
    weightless
    on the ripple skin
    of a stream.( 3)

The picture of “the bubble-eyed water bugs” perching “weightless” on the “ripple skin of a stream” is realistically portrayed in the poem. The image achieves a spiritual dimension when the poet says:

    No, not only prophets
walk on water. This bug sits
on a landslide of lights
and drown eye-
deep
into its tiny strip
of sky. (3)

This description recalls to our mind Arun Kolatkar’s “The Butterfly” where the poet talks about the butterfly which “has no future”. This insect is “pinned down to no past” and it appears to be “a pun on the present”:

It’s a little yellow butterfly.
It has taken these wretched hills
under its wings.
Just a pinch of yellow,
it opens before it closes
and closes before it
where is it. (13)

In ‘Striders’ the picture is not imitative but sculpturesque in its effect. Ramanujan is a wordsmith. His craftsmanship with regard to the use of words and rhythm is obviously seen when the poet succeeds in bringing the striders before the readers. Here it is appropriate to quote Satyanarain Singh who observes in his article “Ramanujan and Ezekiel”: 
In Ramanujan’s poetry, the image outruns the idea while Ezekiel’s poetry the idea eludes the images….Ramanujan turns language into an artifact while Ezekiel wants life to follow art. (110)

Ramanujan’s poetry is an image craft. He uses imagery to signify all the objects. And figurative language is employed as the vehicle of metaphors and similes. Ramanujan introduces a series of playful juxtapositions. And they bring forth the ambivalences, the duplicities and the paradoxes of average human existence. It is observed that Ramanujan does not employ any one sustained metaphor to expose the pretense of human life in general. The very parody itself becomes a metaphor. Ramanujan’s paradoxical way of looking at the opposites of life is perceived with reference to the below-mentioned poetic lines. According to the poet,

Beauty is ugly, sad is glad,

truths are lies

when living by contraries,

his roots are topsy turvy tress

rivers mirrors of heat,

long-dead faces fish at his feet,

and ears have eyes. (230)
The image of tree, in Ramanujan’s poetry, is always upside down. It signifies the inverted character of the persona itself. The naked roots go skyward, and branches touch the earth. The sky consequently becomes his earth. Dry river-beds reflect the rays the sun like a perfect mirror. It appears that sometimes the poet operates through the principle of contradiction to talk straight. The paradoxical manner in which he behaves gives a hammer stroke to his message. The detractor is forced to realize the effect. He says:

Not knowing how to beat him up
in my rage I strike the walls
and hit my head
till blood streams down my cheeks
he takes me home and bandages my head (216)

Anger brings misery to oneself. But the speaker, instead of hitting the opponent, takes suffering on himself. This is a sheer instance of paradox indicating that how in moments of confusion and stalemate, paradox or the principle of contraries is a method of finding a way out. In such situations the paradoxes attain metaphysical intensity. For example, everywhere, there is darkness but the speakers eyes see butterflies which appear to be the glowing monarch of the surrounding.

Blinking in the light
she stares into midnight
crowded by the dark
her eyes sees glowing monarch
butterflies. (230)

In another poem titled “Many a Slip”, the slippery nature of human existence with all its complexity and paradoxes comes to the forefront. ‘Slip’ is a common occurrence in the world of Ramanujan’s. It is also the functioning aspect of life. The poet is concerned at the slippage that one experiences in life. He writes:

On Brothers’ Day, sisters rescue brothers,
on mother’s Day, sons worship mothers
who left them with baby sisters
to go to movies. Resentment festers
on such days.

On New Year’s Day, people make resolutions
to break them by evening:...( 11)

Each ‘day’ mentioned in the poem has a seriousness about it, which the poet discovers being given up everywhere in actual practice. The poet wants to say that we are good at making resolutions. At the same time we feel better only when the resolutions are thwarted, knowingly or unknowingly.

Ramanujan focuses on those who flout their own self-made boundaries. Equally, nothing remains intact and secure in the poetic
world of Ramanujan. There is always some narrow crack or opening in the structure and the poet is able to peer through it. The poet wants to establish the fact that a single chink in our armour would make us lose life badly. So, one has to be aware of the ill effect of spills, splashes or leakage in the cellar of life. The poet illustrates the idea by citing a wedding scene where everyone is busy; especially women busy themselves with unimportant matters. Woman fail to give attention to the most important and essential things in life. So during the course of group interaction, the poet writes:

They often stopped maybe for a chat
with a buyer,
or a dip
into patchwork pouches for betelnut
and tobacco,
or likelier still, to lay
a little nest-egg under the mat
to hatch on a rainy day. (9)

Leaks, which are either dead slow or too quick, are inevitable factors in life. Ramanujan records the miniscule drama of life in which people opt for negotiations between every selling and buying. The poet attempt to say that there are some who aim at extraordinary but settle for ordinary or sometimes second best. This secret compromise is accepted
neither overtly nor covertly. One always goes for a cover-up of the effects of life. The difference between prose and poetry is in the selection and application of words. Prose depends on expansion, whereas poetry thrives on compression, contraction on concentration of layers of meanings.

Parody is an inherent attribute of dynamic languages. English is a dynamic language using parodies a lot of men and matters. It is true reality looks pleasant and soothing on the surface. But all that glitters is not gold. So when one perceives reality under a microscope it shows a crater. What attracts and thrills at distant quarters is deadly when one goes near the object. The other side of the coin or the hedge is dangerous or unimaginable. One can observe reality either through a microscope (close vision) or a telescope (distant vision). And the frustrating, disappointing or disapproving gap between these two types of vision constitutes the space of parody or travesty. After reading Primo Levi’s poem on “Butterflies”, the poet learns about the crookedness of these visibly beautiful insects. Therefore he states:

They are gluttonous monsters,

eyes without pupils, antennae

coiled whips with rows

of teeth: no less than sexy

and the young, they zigzag

through our quotidian day
and sober our sense
of the beautiful. Only crows
fly straight. (269)

When viewed under a microscope, the butterflies appear monstrous. They are far more crooked than the infamous crows. The butterflies seem to be as ravenous and sexy as blood-sucking witches. Fair is foul and foul is fair in the aesthetic world of the poet. There is a topsy-turvdom of appearance and values. Such a head over the heels approach is strange but fascinating.

That is to say if butterflies could be menacing and monstrous, scorpions appear to have a ravishing beauty despite their poisonous stings. Reversal of aesthetics is thus common in Ramanujan. There is an uncle who describes the beauty of baby scorpions:

They glow like hand-carved rubies
from Peking, redder than garnet,
especially when you hold them up
to the light. (145)

The beauty of baby scorpions is portrayed. The poet shows equal grown scorpions admiration for the fully too. Ramanujan, of course through the anonymous uncle, looks up to the adult scorpions thus:

And when they grow big,
they take on the colour of gray
Ramanujan skillfully and effectively uses the technique of juxtaposition. The broken glass, the symbol of destruction, is replaced with the yellow flower which signifies hope. Looking at the creativity around him, the poet forgets the eczema on his feet and the holes in his shoe. He dreams of a happy future where he and his wife would someday, somehow, share with each other sweet moments. Ramanujan narrates his dream in the following manner.

I walk on water, can even bear
to walk on earth for my wife
and I will someday somehow share
a language, a fire, a clean first floor
with a hill in the window; and eat
on an ancient sandalwood door. (57)

The images are differentiated in such a manner that they suggest the rebirth of their psyche. He does not follow the logic of the mind; but the logic of his emotions. When he sees the co-existence of sterility and creativity his leaden heart gets lightened resulting in soaring optimism. But when there is a conflict between tradition and modernity, he yields to the attraction of Western style even though his Brahmin ancestry rebels
against it at first. To be modern, according to Ramanujan, is to shed one’s inhibitions. Modernity is also equated with experimental knowledge.

To throw more light on the use of language in poetry, we can say that from early times man has attempted to crystallise ‘reality’ in figurative speech. Words, Cleanth Brooks says, lend themselves to symbolic dimensions. They can be analysed as archetypal symbol, rituals and myth. The archetypal patterns in poetry offer a clue as to how its formal structure is related to the basic patterns and symbols of our psyche. As Jung says:

Every relation to the archetype whether through experience or the mere spoken words is “stirring” i.e., it is impressive, it calls up a stronger voice than our own. The man who speaks with primordial images speaks with a thousand tongues; he entrances and over powers, while at the same time he raises the idea he is trying to express above the occasional and the transitory into the sphere of the ever-existing: He transmutes personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, thus evoking all those beneficent forces that have enabled mankind to find a rescue from every hazard and to outlive the longest night. That is the secret of effective art. The creative process, in so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in unconscious
animation and shaping of this image till the work is completed. (qtd in Rama Nair 32)

Ramanujan’s poetry helps us realize the primordial images which recur in the form of literary symbols. It is possible that the poet could recreate long forgotten memories for his readers so that they may live to tell the tale of poetry which speaks the language of aesthetics. Ramanujan communicates his ideas through the images. He uses imagistic verse.

In “Self-Portrait” the main protagonist is one who has lost his identity. The poet reveals his helpless condition.. Modern man hardly has an anchorage. The loss of roots is reflected in the distorted image in the mirror. The mirror instead of reflecting the poet’s image, reflects the portrait of a stranger.

Despite the well-known laws of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.(23)

The portrait of the stranger is signed in the corner by his father. The loss of traditional values in the son is metaphorically represented by the loss of image in the mirror. His father’s signature is a constant
reminder that these values cannot be easily or entirely forsaken or forgotten.

Characterisation is an important aspect of storytelling. Ramanujan describes portraits that necessitate the plunge into the finesse of a master storyteller. Each portrait is a story into itself. It amounts to be a tense tale showing the psychological, moral or social dualities of a character. In fact, in the folk tradition, stories appear to be character-sketches of local heroes and legends. Ramanujan’s characters are neither legendary nor heroic. They have their individuality and specific attributes which make them immensely worthy of poetic treatment. Most of the poems are titled after the name of the main character. More than just a poem, “astronomer” is a story of an obsessive star-gazer. He is a “sky-man in the manhole”. He stands for one who is pulled from above by the forces of stars, and driven downwards by the gravity of flesh and blood. This tension between the celestial and the terrestrial forms the very narrative of the poem.

Clutching at the tear
in his birthday shirt
as at a hole
in his mildewed horoscope

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

squinting at the parallax
of his black planets,

his tiger, his hare

moving in Sanskrit zodiacs,

forever troubled

by the fractions, the kidneys

in his Tamil flesh. (134)

The character description reaches its climax when, the poet, towards the end, shows the astronomer as one who longs for

The woman-smell

in the small curly hair

down there. (134)

“Guru” is another humorous portrait-poem. Here, Ramanujan exploits the technique of juxtaposition to structure his story about one of those pseudo-saints who crowd the modern-day spiritual bazaar. To begin with, the guru preaches:

Forgive the weasel his tooth

forgive the tiger his claw (251)

But the hypocrisy of this agent of the divine is exposed in the next lines as he asks the poet persona as a devotee to clean his shoe/bake his bread and wash his clothes (251). The structural pattern of juxtaposition repeats itself. What the guru preaches, he does not practice. He keeps saying:
Give the dog his bone, the parrot
his seed, the pet snake his mouse
but do not give woman her freedom
nor man his midday meal till he begs(251)

But he orders the poet persona to make arrangements for his breakfast. He asks him to carry his chair to his dais. The last six lines constitute the denouement of the narrative as the poet persona exposes the duplicity of the unholy guru in the words:

I gave the dog his bone, the parrot
his seed, the pet snake his mouse,
forgave the weasel his tooth,
forgave the tiger his claw,
and left the guru to clean his own shoe
for I remember I was a man born of woman.(251)

The poet-persona realizes his self-identity and individuality. He would not allow from now onwards any god man to treat him as slave in the name of religious devotion. In addition to the revelation of character, juxtaposition as a poetic technique has enabled the poet to show that the consistency in the action of the persona is contrasted with the inconsistency in the guru’s conduct.

Ramanujan discovers similarity between poems and dreams. Memory tends to escape both if it is not properly tied down. Therefore it
is said “dreams like poems get lost/if their tails are not knotted for memory” (12). Poems are described as ‘tails of memory’. It is difficult to capture memory as a whole. The poet could only manage to cling on to its tail. And it is through this tail that Ramanujan imagines and reconstructs the entire body. Thus poetry which lies in capturing the tail piece of memory forms its right stuff.

Similar to the inseparable link between poetry and memory, Ramanujan notices the affinity between mathematical theorems and poetic composition. Theorems are the product of the intellect. They require deep thinking. In case, we fail to give attention to it, they may become invalid or impractical. While formulating theory, one has to wrestle with one’s intellect. The same exists in the case of poetry too. He postulates:

Poems like my father’s midnight
theorems get lost if you do not
talk to them, take
their part in a quarrel
with their rival theorems (12)

Poetry is an outcome of an inner intellectual uncertainty, because each poem encounters the emergence of yet another rival poem in the mind of a poet. Thus there is always an internal clash during the process of which the poet quarrels with himself to give birth to a poem of his
intense desire. It amounts to say that every act of creation rests on the struggle between discord and concord leading to a satisfactory solution to the turmoil experienced by the poet. As discussed earlier poetry arises out of opposites. For instance, there is forever a tension between human body and nature. Human body is controlled by the cycle of changes in the vegetable and mineral worlds. But the concept of time is more abstract and impersonal. These ideas are found not only in the early poems in “The Striders” but also in the later poems in “Second Sight”.

The abstract concept of death is given a personal touch when he foretells the arrival of his own death in the poem ‘Saturday’. Addressing himself in a second person again, as he does in ‘Looking for the Centre’, Ramanujan imagines his own death occurring in Chicago on

A Saturday at three-fifteen

at home in a foreign place

where you jog,

as gold needles of rain

scatter the Art Fair in the park. (150)

The exact day, place, and time are important because the poem explicitly responds to and rewrites Cesar Vallejo’s ‘Black Stone on a White Stone’, in which the Peruvian poet projects his own death at nightfall on a Thursday in Paris. In ‘Saturdays’ Ramanujan invokes the poetic possibility that ‘the body we know’ is not just a natural clockwork
mechanism. It is more elaborately, ‘an almanac’. As an almanac, the human body becomes a record as well as a platform for forecasting astronomical events like, lunar and solar cycles, high and low tides, agricultural activities, changes of weather and season, and daily sunrises and sunsets. But while a farmer’s almanac is based on observation, factual data, and rational prediction, the body’s metaphorical almanac gives scope for more ‘irrational’ modes of charting the processes and networks in nature and time. Such patterns of tracking phenomena include myth, ritual, and even superstition, which give time its human structure and content. These poetic perusals bring out the meaning and utility of the phenomenon.

Thus the poet’s persona is facilitated to observe that his ‘daily dying body’ serves as ‘the one good omen/in a calendar of ominous Saturdays’. He has stated in his own fictionalized biography that a Saturday is ominous because his mother and one of his brothers passed away on that day of the week, though the tragedy took place on different dates and in different places. In the ancient Roman History a Saturday is ominous because the ancient Romans set the day aside for their games of death at the Coliseum, from which Syrian Christian-his wife’s ancestors-could escape only by migrating out of imperial Rome. According to the Indian folk-belief ‘the day of Saturn’ invites disaster more than any other day in the week. As per the Western astrological prediction, Saturn is
ominous, because it exercises a dark planetary influence on people, making those who are born on it melancholic, sullen, or ‘saturnine’. In this superstitious context, the poet imagines his own end as a ‘good omen’, because dying on a Saturday would have the force of a predestined or over determined event. He feels that his body’s internal melody is already synchronized with the external patter because

Saturday ache
in shoulder 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 upspent
panic, with no third eye, only a dent
the mark ancestors in Syria, refuges
from Roman Saturdays. (151)

Thus the poet projects his own past and also other’s past. He sees himself ‘imprisoned in reverse/in the looking/glass image of time (151). The linear nature of life co-ordinates, and interconnects all natural, historical, mythical and astrological influence of time on humanity. In a
picture frame the time past and the time past get intertwined and illustrated keeping in view the anticipatory effect of the future.

The poem “The Difference” can also be studied in terms of juxtaposition of two time frames the communal and the private, the objective and the subjective. Subjective/private time has its specific priorities and preferences. But community spends its prime time in shaping the divine figures out of clay and straw. And therefore the stray individual might choose to spend the same time in shaping his toys. In the first half of the poem, the poet describes the routine of traditional craftsman:

It’s with leftovers they make horses, toys;
life scenes of women
pounding rice with lifted pestles;
boys; or a drummer girl playing
with both hands
the two-headed drum for two dancers
with long brazen necks, long legs, long hands,
arrested in a whirl. (171-172)

In the second half of the poem, the order of preference or the time-schedule is reversed. The collective poet persona, however, would

Do my dancers first
for tourists
these days, then come through pestles,
women, jet bombers
and tiny Taj Mahals
and horses to the gods who will bake
only if time permits, if there’s metal left,
and desire
or if my children’s quarrels need new gods. (172)

The poet has only a fragmentary of life. And eternity is supposed to
be “a rumoured beat of his extraordinary heart” (173). As Wendy Doniger
says in her Introduction to The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan,
“before Ramanujan, Indian scholars in the U.S. were merely native
informants, but Ramanujan blazed a great path through the centre of
Indological studies”. To quote her:

At a time the American Indological establishment regarded
native Indian scholars merely sources of Information about
languages and texts, like the raw Fibres that were taken from
India to be processed in British mills, but seldom as scholars
who might have their own ideas about how to process those
texts, Ramanujan taught them all how to weave a theory, a
Folk tale, ape, a book…. (3)
Doniger maintains that the strength of ancient India could be comprehended properly only by means of the different perspectives that Ramanujan’s work made possible.

Unlike the Post colonialist scholars, Ramanujan did not have any political agenda in his articulations of Indian thought. His aversion for politics is well-known. In a passing reference to Edward Said, Ramanujan says that the discourse on the Orient has become controversial: “Indology is an invention and gift of Western Scholarship, an ambiguous gift according to some. (Edward Said 8)

Ramanujan is certain that India is multicultural. As he says in his essay, “Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections,”

I would like to suggest the obvious that cultural Traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organizes through at least two principles, (a) Context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones. What we call Brahmanism, bhakti, traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, tantra, tribal traditions and folklore, and lastly modernity itself are the most prominent of systems. (Ramanujan 8)

Ramanujan recognises India’s cultural plurality, He refers to the “vast variety of Indian literature, oral and written, over the centuries, in
hundreds of languages and dialects” (8). It is his firm stance that “Indian literature is one but written in many language,” saying “I, for one, would prefer the plural, ‘Indian literature’ and would wonder if something would remain the same if it is written in several languages, knowing as I do that even in the same language, ‘a change of style is a change of subject’, as Wallace Stevens would say,” (7).

Ramanujan had a deeper intellectual background and involvement with Indian culture. Even though Ramanujan deals with classical Tamil and Kannada writings, he is at home with the larger Indian ethos. While describing Indian culture, Ezekiel says:

Confiscate my pass port, Lord,
I don’t want to go abroad.
let me find my song
where I belong. (212)

For Ezekiel here, as for every cultural migrant or individual there is a distinction between the sense of belonging to a specific native cultural context and the ‘alien culture, for which a passport is required. He is the traveller in search of home wherever he goes. But Ramanujan took his home with him; and his God is very different.

Ramanujan’s poetic craftsmanship is influenced by renowned Tamil poets. He says that in their writings he discovered,
……the landscapes, the personae, the appropriate moods, all becomes a language within language. Like a native speaker, he makes “infinite use of finite means”, to say with familiar words what has been said before; he can say exactly what he wants to, without even being aware of the ground, rules of his grammar. (114-15)

Ramanujan is also indebted to Kannada Bhakti poets. As he says, The traditional tune-beat, like the ritual gesture was felt to be learned, passive, inorganic. Here too, the Stharava, the standing thing shall fall, but the jangama shall prevail. (38)

Ramanujan has been profoundly influenced by the best poets of the traditional India as well as the modern Western poets. And these two factors of influence are responsible for the complexity of his poetic vision and genius.

As Bruce King says “His Indianness is a part of his past, with which he is inextricably linked as he changes and develops” (8). In the words of Ramanujan.

Just as our biological past lives in the physical body our social and cultural past lives in the many cultural bodies that we inherit, our languages, arts, religions, and life cycle rites (184)
Like this biological past, the poet’s cultural past continues to live. Ramanujan happens to inhabit two circles, his stay in the U.S and his visit to India. But many a time he tries to merge one experience with the other or when he experiences one aspect of life he imagines the hypothetical result of inhabiting the other. This is the thematic and technical matrix that one observes in his work.

It is said that there is a deep sense of alienation in his poetry. He felt intensely about his cultural roots on alien soil. This has urged him to return to Hindu ethos in his poetry. Referring to “Prayers to Lord Murugan” he says that it “could not have been written if I did not know classical Tamil forms, and even some of the images there” (117). He also stresses the importance of the forms of Classical Tamil poetry and how he tried to adapt those forms in his English poems:

I prefer the Classical. A typical “Sangam” poem has well-defined, well-wrought complex form. It has an articulate body of convention behind it. The images are not flaunted here but are sharp and point (Nakulan 11)

In his use of the Classical Tamil forms, Ramanujan prefers sharpness of the images. At the same time he has made use of the technique of Western poetry too. For instance, in the first section of “Prayers to Lord Murughan”, Ramanujan deals with the deep sense of loss in the modern world because the Tamil Gods lost significance in a
spiritually bankrupt world. The poet’s use of images related to the spiritual bankruptcy of the modern world reminds us of the images used by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. Thus, in “Prayers to Lord Murugan”, Ramanujan attempts to use human and concrete forms to express the “ultimate yet intimate nature of the religious experience” (Ramanujan 170). Ramanujan’s reference to the concept of religion is not in any abstract sense. It is very much concerned with the modern existence. Ramanujan is good at writing poetry which has many layers of meaning. His skill in using several layers of meaning adds to the richness and complexity of his poetry.

In the poem, “Lines to a Granny”, the poet talks about darkness and noonday, sleep and waking, earth and water, the grandmother’s tale, the child’s dream and the reality that underlies them. Moving between the multi-coloured layers of meaning, the poem shows itself as an intricate but beautiful linguistic web. This web not only tells but vividly presents how our world is captured in language. The readers are actively involved in unraveling the intricacy of the poem. This is the typical and unique poetic style of Ramanujan.

Similarly, the above mentioned poem, “Lines to a Granny” is a poetic feast to the young and the old. The young depends on the old to activate their imagination through bedtime tales. And the old take up the
responsibility of infusing morality and cultural ethos through the art of storytelling. The poet makes an address:

Granny

tell me again in the dark

about the wandering prince;

and his steed, with a neem-leaf mark

upon his brow, will prance

again to splash his noonday image

in the sleep of these pools. (17)

The poem has got a psychological perspective too. Consciousness and sub-consciousness are interrelated as much as the act of creation and destruction. The pool stands for sub-consciousness and the traveller’s image falls upon the pool because it is noon. And the splashing horse prince’s creates and shatters the image in one and the same act. Both moments are necessary to bring about the desired awakening in a person. And in the next phase of the narrative, it is again the image of destruction that dominates as the prince who breaks

With sesame words

known only to the birds,

the cobweb curtained door; and awake

the sentinel, the bawdy cook;;

the parrot in the cage
will shout his name
to the gossip of the kitchen’s blowzy flame.(17)

The symbolic act of breaking the image makes it clear that linguistic and erotic enactment follow the same pattern. After these two acts to the prince’s chamber opens out into a recognizable location of the poet’s childhood. It presents the image of an ordinary South Indian kitchen with parrot, gossiping cook and “blowsy flame”. Thus the poet wishes to say that life is characterized by moments of creation and destruction, its caesuras and continuities. All these changing and challenging patterns of life are shown in a single web of poetic language.

In the second stanza breaking becomes shaping. But now, it is a shaping of darkness:

Let him, dear granny,
shape the darkness
and take again
the princess
whose breath would hardly strain
the spider’s design. (17)

During the dramatic narration of the poem, the man and the woman’s sigh of relief, because she is being rescued by her lover, renders a moment of stasis to the poem. The woman’s deep breath goes to the
extent of affecting the spider’s web. And another level, the spider’s web stands for the fascinating tale uttered by the Granny.

Thus the bed time story narrates an event. It illustrates. It substantiates. It enables the reader to contemplate the proceedings of the event. The story ultimately reveals the truth of life that death is inevitable and nobody can avoid death. However, death is not the end of life in the sense it leads to eternity. As darkness leads to light, the cyclical nature of life thus forms the dynamic nature of the poem. The poem’s narrative and dramatic pattern is fascinating.