CHAPTER-3
IRONY AS A TECHNIQUE OF POETIC IMAGINATION IN
THE POETRY OF LARKIN AND RAMANUJAN

I

Irony has been an established technique of modern poetic imagination. It is involved in the poet's approach to the different aspects of life, the way he takes to the themes of his poetry, like time, love, death etc. And if the poet prefers to maintain an artistic detachment while delineating his thoughts, as both Larkin and Ramanujan have done, then irony is perhaps the best instrument in helping them in their craft, for irony, as nothing else, stimulates a detached point of view by creating a critical distance. Regarding the importance of irony in literature, D.C. Muecke has rightly remarked that, "the importance of irony in literature is beyond question".¹ Muecke has given a list of major writers starting from Homer upto the present age to support his view that all art or literature is not only essentially, but necessarily, ironic.

Let us have a look at the etymology of the term 'irony' before discussing the function of irony in poetry and its changing role according to the changes in time and circumstances. M.H. Abrams in
his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms* says about the origin of the term irony:

In Greek comedy the character called the *eiron* was a "dissembler", who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazon* - the self-deceived and stupid braggart. In most of the modern critical uses of the term "irony" there remains the root sense of dissembling or hiding what is actually the case; not, however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects.\(^2\)

In some of the translations of *Poetics*, as Muecke has pointed out, the word "irony" has been used to present Aristotle's 'peripeteia' which is a sudden reversal of circumstances.\(^3\) This meaning of irony perhaps includes the meaning of dramatic irony also.

In the Romantic period, we notice a radical change in the concept of irony. Before, irony was an intentional instrument to serve a particular purpose; now it became a part of the artistic idiom. It could be unintentional and could be manifested in art by representing some happening in such a way that the reader or the audience becomes aware of something implicit. Then on irony has become double-natured — both intentional and hidden, but perceivable. We can take "A slumber did my spirit seal", one of the "Lucy" poems by Wordsworth,
as an example of implicit irony where the contrast inherent in the theme has not been shown consciously; it might have come to the poet's mind quite spontaneously in a natural manner. But the reader can find ironical connotations in the context. We can say that there is ironical contrast in the conditions of the girl whom the poet loved. Initially she was full of fearless love and "could not feel / The touch of earthly years", but now that she being in her grave, "She neither hears nor sees"; but is "Rolled round" with the universal whirl of the "earth's diurnal course" and thus becomes a victim of time's indomitable power. Here there is an ironic contrast between the finite power of man and the infinite power of time as an indomitable force. Now the sphere of irony from being local or occasional has been transformed to a generalized phenomenon, where the whole world can be seen as a stage where the human beings are mere actors and hence passive instruments of an unknown force.

A more important meaning to the word "irony" was imparted by the German ironologist Friedrich Schlegel. He also showed irony in someone's being the victim of irony and by this the attention of the reader or the spectator was shifted from the active to the passive where man is being victimized by someone or by Fate. Schlegel also showed man as having limited powers and who is trying to understand and combat the infinite power of nature. As a result, his knowledge of nature remains limited and he becomes a victim of the infinite power of
nature. But Schlegel's importance lies in his showing life as a "dialectic process". According to him, the artist, who himself is a part of nature, by the power of his imagination would not let man become a hopeless victim of nature's indomitable force. He would save man from his predicament by allowing him to transcend the situation. Here man has the power 'to create and de-create'. Schlegel had shown that the artist's Instrumental irony can counter-attack the implicit irony.

The last of the many new meanings of the word 'irony' as Muecke has pointed out, is the objectivity of the artist. This meaning is also attached to 'irony' by German Romanticism. Both Friedrich Schlegel and his brother A.W. Schlegel supported this view. The objectivity of the artist in irony differentiates it in the primary level from invective which is a direct weapon of attack. An invective for its directness does not demand the intellect of the reader. But the objective and hence detached nature of irony demands the participation and association of the reader's intellect and indirectly convey an implicit compliment to the intelligence of the readers. While differentiating direct invective from indirect irony Dryden in his Discourse Concerning Satire has pointed out the advantage that the ironist has because of his detached attitude:

There is ... a vast difference between the slovenly butchering of a man, and the fineness of a stroke that
separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place.  

Dryden indeed talks here about the finest instrument of irony itself. Verbal or intentional irony is a crude and gross instrument. But when the artist is finely detached, and he internalizes the instrument as it were, he becomes objective and universal.

A.W. Schlegel, while pointing out the limitation of the majority of the artists where they choose to find a particular character as his mouthpiece and project his views through him, appreciated the mastery of Shakespeare’s art by saying that .

... Shakespeare, though he endows each of his characters, his ‘created forms’, with so much life that we cannot doubt that he has entered into their feelings, is at the same time detached from them all and ‘soars freely above’ the subjects of his plays, so that they do not express his own subjectivity but collectively ‘express the whole world’, which, as Goethe says, is the mark of a real artist.

Irony as a poetic technique has been appreciated in the modern times by T.S. Eliot as a kind of ‘wit’ present in the user; according to him, it is a kind of intellectual equilibrium which has the power to deal with one kind of expression while at the same time to be able to imply the possibility of some other kind of experience that can be derived out
of the same context. I.A. Richards in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, defines irony by saying it as an equilibrium of opposing attitudes and observes,

> Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry which is exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry which is.⁶

These observations by Eliot and Richards have been further developed by the new critics like Cleanth Brooks. According to them if a poem becomes solely devoted to a single attitude or feeling, and remains invulnerable to irony, there is the risk that such poem may be vulnerable to the reader's ironic scepticism. On the other hand, the greatest poetry remains invulnerable to external irony, that is the ironical interpretation of the reader of his work by being already aware of the ironic opposite and involving it in his work.⁷ What is important and essential then, is a synthesis of irony and the pressure of the context,

> ... that is, a poetry which does not leave out what is apparently hostile to its dominant tone, and which, because it is able to fuse the irrelevant and discordant, has come to terms with itself and is invulnerable to irony. Irony, then, in this further sense, is not only an
Acknowledgement of the pressures of a context. Invulnerability to irony is the stability of a context in which the internal pressures balance and mutually support each other.8

The scope of irony in poetry has been very aptly explained by Muecke in his First Edition of the book Irony and the Ironic which is entitled Irony. It sums up the role of irony in literature:

Like the graphic arts, it can depict ironic situations. But the language it employs is obviously far more able to deal with what people say, think, feel, and believe, and consequently with the differences between what people say and what they think and between what is believed to be and what is the case. And this precisely is the area within which irony operates.9

But apart from that supremacy of language and production of rhetorical effect in poetry, irony has a far deeper implication today. We have seen that irony as a technique has traversed a long way from being the lightest wit of the Greek comedy to the present times when it has become a modern and sophisticated mode of perception of the different aspects of life. Naturally, the function of irony has also become more serious. Again, in modern times, English language has been transformed to such a degree that the role of irony had extended itself from supplying mere artistic effects to retaining its past glory by
reinforcing its spirit. Therefore, though the responsibility of developing and purifying language is perennial "it is imposed on the modern poet as a special burden". Cleanth Brooks's comment on this issue is worth contemplating:

A great deal of modern poetry does use irony as its special and perhaps its characteristic strategy. For this there are reasons, and compelling reasons. To cite only a few of these reasons: there is the breakdown of a common symbolism; there is the general scepticism as to universals; not least important, there is the depletion and corruption of the very language itself, by advertising, and by the mass-produced arts of radio, the moving picture, and pulp fiction. The modern poet has the task of rehabilitating a tired and drained language so that it can convey meanings once more with force and with exactitude. 10

While being aware of all these responsibilities, the modern poet also has to be conscious of his readers who are no longer simple and docile: they always tend to be sophisticated and curious.

II

It is ironical that the public to whom the modern poetry is addressed in most of the poems is itself being ironically attacked. In most of the poems of both Larkin and Ramanujan, we find that they
have used irony not merely as a part of their rhetoric but also for some other deeper purpose. As their irony is not bitter, it gently mocks at the limitations of modern life itself, while at the same time it betrays their sentiments for tradition and faith in continuity. Larkin’s anti-modernist stand in literature and the warmth of his feeling for his native land have placed him in the line of the tradition of English poets, that includes Wordsworth. I think this point needs a little elaboration to explain how Larkin’s poetry belongs to the tradition of English poetry, and at the same time, maintains its relevance and importance in modern English poetry by showing the ethos of the age sincerely and convincingly. Geoffrey Harvey in his book titled *The Romantic Tradition in Modern English Poetry* has included Larkin with Wordsworth, Hardy, and Betjeman and has remarked:

... the poets under consideration represent the modern continuation of an English tradition in which there is a dynamic co-operation between the sympathetic, affirmative and the ironic, detached response to life; and moreover that the tradition they represent (including, for instance, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wyatt, Donne and many of the Augustans), which might usually be called the poetry of equipoise, was given a new infusion of life and vigour by Wordsworth.¹¹
Modern poetry is post-Romantic in the sense that it rejects some fundamental concepts which are attached to the Romantic poetry — transcendence and an 'egotistical sublime'. However, post-Modernist verse inherits Wordsworth's poetry of equipoise where reality and transcendence are blended together. We have talked about Larkin's appreciation of this tradition of English poetry and his resentment at the interruption of the flow of tradition in Chapter 1. In Larkin's poetry we find his preoccupation with the ordinary life around him which he is experiencing. There are poems by Larkin where we find the poet's wish to transcend the encircling gloom persisting in the modern world. But then it is difficult to say whether he has attained the equipoise between his consciousness of the reality of the modern complex world and his yearning to overcome that darkness. In the poems where we find the co-existence of these two sensibilities, we observe a kind of tension. In such poems the moment of epiphany comes after a long delineation of the present state of things. These poems, rather, register the inherent ambivalence in the modern mind that accepts the reality of life but at the same time feels that there must be some way to overcome this constraint of modern life. It has happened because the modern man finds it difficult to accept anything as absolutely positive or affirmative though he feels the urgency of its need. It is impossible to find in modern poetry the "colouring of imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind
in an unusual aspect". In Larkin's poetry, we find that, poetry that arises spontaneously from the experience of life, has been enriched not by the colouring of imagination, but by the poignancy of the reality of human life that is absolutely devoid of romanticism. Larkin's poetry registers a characteristically twentieth-century refusal of romanticism in a very convincing manner. It is convincing because it is deeply rooted in the sentiments and atmosphere of the contemporary British life as Philip Thody has pointed out:

In a cooler emotional temperature, some of the success of the poetry of Philip Larkin stems from the way he embodies a way of looking at experience which reflects something of the national mood in the England of the second half of the twentieth-century. 

It is quite natural that the poets, who want to retain tradition and at the same time wish to delineate the contemporary degenerated state of things in a sensitive and sophisticated manner, would prefer a technique that can help them in expressing themselves obliquely. There is, perhaps, no other appropriate instrument in literature, other than irony, that can help the poet in expressing his views in a detached manner.

In the poetry of Larkin as well as of Ramanujan, we find an extensive use of both verbal and situational irony. Their poetry reflects the psychology of the modern man who has seen the cruelty of human
beings, the insincerity of feelings of human beings towards their fellow beings. The modern man sees the power-game between two human beings, between nations. This experience, in its turn, points to the irony and also paradox to some extent, in the rejection of Christianity by some of the twentieth-century writers (e.g., Albert Camus's *The Plague* and, in more recent times, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*) because they find God's ways to be cruel and unjustified. The irony in this misconception of the writers of this century lies in the fact that it is in the twentieth-century that we have experienced and still experiencing a constant or steep disorientation of human values by human beings themselves. The degradation of political values and its strong influence on the modern mind, have also made us sceptical about the power of literature to change the present scenario. And we find an echo of this feeling in Auden's remark when he says sadly that none of his poems was able to save a single Jew from the gas chamber. It "expresses the irony of one of the greatest poets of the century coming to realise that there are times when the pen is not, after all, mightier than the sword".14

In the poetry of Larkin and Ramanujan, we find that they are not trying to transfer the responsibility of man's miseries to God or to some inconceivable power whose ways transcend the human perception. Their poetry is empirical not only in the sense that they deal with contemporary situation and characters, but also because they have a
very clear conception of the root cause of human sufferings – that is
the insensitivity of the modern man towards his fellow men. As a result,
they are not ready to accept things as merely the design of Fate or
God, that we find, say, in the works of Hardy. Hardy has seen irony
belonging to not the structure of poetry but to the structure of the
universe itself. Thus, he has introduced irony in his works but that has
taken the shape of cosmic irony. He has seen God's ironic design in
the situations that a person faces in life. For example, the heroine of
his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, or the hero of *Jude the Obscure*,
is a victim of the design of fate; in the case of Tess, we find that
whenever she tries to be happy, an adverse force comes to shatter
that. But in Larkin's as well as in Ramanujan's poems we find that it is
not God, it is the modern life itself and the modern man himself that
have been entangled in ironical situations created by themselves only.
Thus irony has taken on a very special significance in the poetry of
these two poets. In Larkin's poems we find that there is a tension, a tug
of war between the inner meaning and the content out of which the
meaning wants to be released. This tension is present in his most
significant poem "Church Going" (*TLD*, 28-29). The title itself is ironical
as if going to the church is one of the many uneasy compulsions of the
modern man:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: ...

Hatless, I take off

My cycle-clips in awkward reverence, ...

Therefore, as 'going to the church' is ironical, it is also clear that the church itself is a 'going' or 'declining' concern as it has apparently lost its central importance. The agnostic and sceptical mind of the persona is hesitant while entering the church. His approach is of a post-war middle-class man who is underpaid and underfed. He has lost his simple faith but does not know where else to put his faith in. So, he enters the church but behaves like an awkward misfit. However, the poem leans to positive thinking towards the end, though irony pervades the beginning of the poem. And here we acknowledge the tension between the detached ironical personality of the persona and his serious and sincere change of mood in realizing the seriousness of religious institutions. The final stanza appears as trying to adjust and give a more developed coherence to the inner ironic temper. There is a clear ironical contrast between the two different levels of perception in the mind of the persona: his initial, casual survey of the church and his ironical remarks related to it, and the level where the modern, agnostic mind of the persona cannot but accept the value of the traditional beliefs and institutions as having the power to give some relief to the suffering humanity.
The same tension can be found in the title poem of Larkin’s another book The Whitsun Weddings. Here the persona while journeying by a train observes the passengers who are on board and who are boarding the train from different stations. Most of the passengers are newly-married couples; their relatives and friends have come to see them off. The persona is observing all these people as a person observing and laughing up his sleeve. The poem, like most of the longer poems of Larkin, has a casual start. Thus gradually the persona’s ironical remarks come,

... grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, ...

And again,

The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding.

The ironical remark “religious wounding” reflects Larkin’s disbelief in marriage as an honourable sacrament. But suddenly towards the end of the poem, his ironic undertone gears up to a thought that is definitely different from his initial stance:

there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

The implication of ‘rain’ can be taken as a hint of Larkin’s hope for regeneration. In such poems we find that Larkin’s satirical remarks and his hope for affirmation with his praise for the positive values emerge from the same ironical context. About this speciality in Larkin’s poetry, Terry Whalen has remarked that:

    His mocking tones are most useful as a guard against pomposity. When Larkin is most strongly sarcastic, he is often moving carefully and ironically toward praise. His irony tends, therefore, to act as a device of exploration more than a shield signifying a recall from experience.¹⁵

Such poems by Larkin can come, to some extent, under the fourth type of ambiguity as classified by William Empson in his book Seven Types of Ambiguity:

    An ambiguity of the fourth type occurs when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author.¹⁶

Empson further explains, “… the stress of the situation absorbs them, and they are felt to be natural under the circumstances”. In Larkin’s case, it is not a statement, but a state of mind that holds the ambiguity and this is “felt to be natural under the circumstances” because they reflect the complex pattern of a modern mind.
When we come to Ramanujan's poems that are tinged with his ironical vision, we find that he has used verbal irony in such poems in a very distinct manner. Ramanujan surveys the Indian scene from across the Atlantic. He is looking at things Indian with an amused detachment while standing at a distance literally. When he wants to hit some cultural practice, his concern is related and confined only to that particular theme, it does not ascend to some sublime thought. As a result, his ironical poems do not register any special kind of ambiguity or tension between his ironical stance and a further growth into its opposite. For example, in his three "Hindoo" poems, "The Hindoo: he doesn't hurt a Fly or a Spider either", "The Hindoo: he reads his Gita and is calm at all events," and, "The Hindoo: the Only Risk", his verbal irony is crystal-clear. When the persona in the first Hindoo poem (Relations,6) says,

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 centered in his web)

my one true ancestor,

the fisherman lover …

there is no tension. It is clear that the poet wants to hit the Hindu faith in the transmigration of the soul, though naughtily. Here Ramanujan’s projection of irony is so gentle and sophisticated that it becomes difficult for the reader to come to the conclusion that he disbelieves in rebirth. This quality of Ramanujan’s irony has saved his poem from becoming sarcastic. Again, in the second Hindoo poem, “The Hindoo. he reads his Gita and is calm at all events” (Relations, 23) the persona says,

I’ve learned to watch lovers without envy

as I’d watch in a bazaar lens

houseflies rub legs or kiss. I look at wounds calmly.

Yet he says in the next stanza,

… 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.
Here we observe an ironical contrast between the façade and the depth. Ramanujan's verbal irony is hitting sharply but gently at the Hindu's belief that the reading of the Gita has given him the power to remain calm at all events which is a mere false outward appearance. In fact he gets disturbed by meeting "on a little boy's face / the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat", and it testifies to the reality that the Gita has not yet really helped him to be really calm. The poem obliquely hits at the ineffectuality of the reading of the Gita on the persona. The irony helps to reveal that the mere negation or suppression of desire, need not mean a genuine disinterestedness.

The same ironic tone can be witnessed in the title poem of The Striders. The poet's irony here points to the sense of the worthless power of the yogis or prophets by saying

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

The balloon of the superior claim of the yogis is deflated by the simple analogy of a small insect, a bug. There is nothing great in a yogi's
being able to walk on water, as an insect can also do that without practising any strenuous yoga.

Again, “Saturdays” (Second Sight, 43) by Ramanujan is a poem where the poet is ironical about the superstitions regarding the ominous foreboding of Saturdays. The persona’s mother and one of his brothers died on a Saturday. It is ominous in Roman history. In Indian folk-belief it brings disaster, while in western belief, one who was born on this day, does not have a common human nature, he may become gloomy or of a sad nature. But, as Vinay Dharwadker has commented on the attitude of the poet on this issue in his poem “Saturdays”,

In a moment of ironic superstition and saturnine irony, the poet can imagine his own end as a ‘good omen’, since dying on a Saturday would have the force of a predestined or overdetermined event. In fact, he feels that his body’s internal rhythm is already synchronized with this composite calendar....

Because,

Saturdays 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 sulpheric sky now a salmon pink,
a wife's always clear face
now dark with unspent panic, with no third eye, only a dent,
the mark marriage leaves on a small forehead
with ancestors in Syria, refugees from Roman Saturdays.

III

At the back of Larkin's ironical portrayal of human behavior or nature we find an unmistakable sign of the poet's sympathy for the common people; at the same time, they reflect his love of tradition which implies a continuity. This is evident in the poems discussed, i.e., "Church Going" and "The Whitsun Weddings". The same approach to the realities of life can be seen in the poetry of Ramanujan. His poetry is basically rooted in Indian culture and specifically South-Indian Brahmin culture and tradition, and his irony naturally rotates mainly around this sphere of the poet's perception. We find irony in Ezekiel's poems, but his poetic savoir-faire precludes any profound attachment to Indian culture. Ezekiel's use of the tongue-in-cheek way of
commenting on the contemporary life has made it possible for him to keep himself detached. His Jewish origin too, together with his urban upbringing, has perhaps helped him to maintain so steadily a poetic detachment. Being asked whether any other poet has used the "tongue-in-cheek" mode of expression, Ezekiel says,

No other Indo-Anglian poet has used the "tongue-in-cheek style" so often as I have. It seems to be rooted in my temperament, whereas the others use it as an occasional device.¹⁸

As a result Ezekiel's irony remains only as a mode of technique in his poetry which is typical of any urban sensibility. The poem "Background, Casually" by Ezekiel expresses the ironical relationship of the poet with India where he says that "The Indian landscape sears" his eyes not because he has his roots here, but because he has made his commitments to stay where he is. But "with poets like A.K. Ramanujan", as Paul C. Verghese comments, it "is not merely a sense of belonging but a commitment to her history and heritage".¹⁹ In R.K.Narayan's novels also we find a comparable attachment to the Indian culture and tradition. One advantage of the novelist is that he can explain his ideas explicitly in his narrative or description, whereas, a poet has to express his perception within the concentration of his poetic medium. In Ramanujan's poems, we find a subtle delineation of his ideas and views. The very title of the sequence of his two poems,
"Love Poem for a Wife. 1" and "Love Poem for a Wife. 2" is ironic. Writing "love poems" for a wife in a traditional Indian setting is absurd. It obliquely refers to the undesirable distance that exists between the husband and the wife in the Indian milieu, whether the reason be the "unshared childhood" or lack of mutual understanding. In Larkin's poems on love also we find an undesirable distance existing between the lovers, either at the physical or the mental level. But Larkin's projection of irony in the context of love has been shown from a different perspective. "No Roads", "Talking in Bed" or "If, My Darling" are poems by Larkin where we find the sad, ironic contrast between our expectation from love and its despairing resultants. However, in Ramanujan's poem "Love poem for a Wife. 1", under the veil of an ironic tone, there are hints of the poet's respect for some perennial values that are very much present in the Indian context, e.g., the line "In the transverse midnight gossip of cousins' reunions" gives hint of the joy of family reunion, or we can feel a father's concern for his daughter in the lines "the burning end of cigarette in the balcony, pacing / to and fro as you came to the gate, late, ..." But the final amusing reference to the ancient custom of betrothing the children before birth, "forestalling separate horoscopes" is definitely ironical and may be taken as a hint of the irony of the fact that maturity in age or relationship being naively bypassed by a fond but futile cleverness.
The poem by Ramanujan that presents an ironic yet “celebratory profile of a large Hindu extended family, tracing its history thematically (rather than chronologically) from about the end of the nineteenth century to the third quarter of the twentieth” is “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House” (Relations, 40). The poem contains all the myths, the superstitions, and the tragedies that happened to the family, but all these details are presented with a tinge of irony. And while the irony in the lines “Neighbours’ dishes brought up / with the greasy sweets they made ... // never leave the house they enter”, lightly hints at the human habit of absorbing other’s things in a consciously unconscious manner, the lines

... the women who came as wives
from houses open on one side
to rising suns, on another
to the setting, accustomed
to wait and to yield to monsoons
in the mountains’ calendar

beating through the hanging banana leaves
perhaps ironically points to the monotonous, uneventful lives of the women belonging to an orthodox Hindu joint family. It is the irony of
their fate that though they had come to the house to start a new life, their new life has offered only stagnancy to their existence. In short, this poem acts as a metaphor for the national history where once someone or something comes never goes out and gets absorbed by it. Commenting on the nature of this poem Vinay Dharwadker in his Introduction to The Collected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan has said that:

Coloured by the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies that are typical of Ramanujan's social poetry, this poem points one of the most memorable 'national portraits' of modern India that we have in twentieth-century poetry.21

There are a number of poems on family and relations by Ramanujan that are tinged with his gentle ironic tone. Ayyappa Paniker has rightly observed that

The confessional note in the poems about close relations, mother, father, grandfather, wife and children gains its aesthetic validity from this ironic stance.22

It is his art that has given an 'aesthetic validity' which, in its turn, has saved Ramanujan's descriptions of his family from being just 'drab autobiographical details'.
When Eliot says in his much quoted essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “The progress of an artist in a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”, his view is rather extreme. Later, he changed his view regarding the poet’s personality and realized that the personality of the poet and tradition can co-exist without any conflict. In “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca”, Eliot accepted the fact that a great poet can serve his personal artistic moods and also his tradition perfectly. Eliot writes in the early thirties:

It is too much to expect any writer of the present time to be a model of orthodoxy ... it is a very different thing to be a classical author in a classical age and to maintain classical ideas in a romantic age .... What we can try to do is to develop a more critical spirit, ...

To develop a “more critical spirit” in the twentieth-century and to maintain a detached view as far as possible, about the happenings around, it is almost essential for the modern poet to take the help of ironical technique that in its turn needs a good deal of dramatization of the situation. Michael Hamburger in his book The Truth of Poetry has remarked about the poetry of Laforgue that, the Romantic-Symbolist aesthetic told Laforgue that “poetry should not be an exact description
(like a page of a novel), but it should be bathed in dream”. He further says,

His irony could serve to mediate between 'gross' realities and delicate fantasies, but the same irony attested that the observer and the dreamer must remain as irreconcilable as the empirical and the poetical selves.\textsuperscript{26}

Here Hamburger clearly states the importance of the presence of the observer with his empirical and at the same time poetic selves. The same empirical and poetical selves, which are well-nigh irreconcilable, are present in the poems of Larkin and Ramanujan. We have seen that Larkin writes and comments on very conventional things or aspects of life, while Ramanujan's poetry remains rooted in his family and relationships. But their style of projection has made the poems remarkable. And it is also remarkable that though Larkin and Ramanujan have handled their themes with a detached stance, their emotional attachment to their respective traditions and cultures, and also their consciousness about the paradox inherent in human existence itself that makes man's life anything but happy, is conceivable from their handling of their themes. With the help of irony, they have exposed the paradox in human existence, but their sympathy for the suffering humanity saves their irony from becoming bitter.
In the poem “To the Sea” (HW, 9) Larkin has written about the British custom of going to the sea annually with family and friends. The reference to the people who have come “to lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf” is ironical. People have come to the natural scenery and atmosphere of the sea-shore but they have not forgotten to bring the modern gadgets like the transistor, though its sound seems “tame” before the sounds of the sea. This is why it has become “half an annual pleasure, half a rite”. “The cheap cigars, / The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves” refer to the momentary and instant pleasures of modern life. Towards the end of the poem, we see that the traditionalist in Larkin assumes

It may be that through habit these do best,

Coming to water clumsily undressed

Yearly; teaching their children by a sort

Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

Though the ending of the poem gears the initial casual description of the poem to almost a mood of transcendence, an impression of ironic contrast is conceivable between the enormous potentiality of nature of which the sea is a part and man’s limited capacity that is bound to surrender to the indomitable power of time. This contrast is evident in the expressions “Coming to water clumsily undressed”, “teaching their children by a sort / Of clowning”. It may be that Larkin has perceived as Kuby has pointed out, a kind of courage on the part of the people who
come annually to the enormous sea with an intention to give continuity to a cultural tradition.²⁷

"Faith Healing" (TWW, 15) is a poem by Larkin where we find the tragic irony that is inherent in human life. Here we find that the anti-hero within the Larkin-persona cannot accept the evangelist's power to heal the pains of the women. Though the faith-healer poses as the Son of God and claims that he will be able to secure the visitors a peaceful life, in reality he is the representative of this commercialized world where he has no time to pause and sympathize. The Larkin-persona has shown sympathy towards the ignorant and helpless ladies who have put their faith in the power of the evangelist and are being victims of the artificial, deceptive modern world. There is a tinge of compassion in Larkin's description of the emotional reaction of the women to the faith-healer's blessings, but Larkin, as a sceptic, cannot but be ironical in describing the women's belief in the power of the evangelist. However, towards the end, as in most of the distinctive poems of Larkin, the tragic irony, inherent in man's life, attains a universal applicability when he says, "In everyone there sleeps / A sense of life lived according to love". It is Larkin's assumption "That nothing cures". Larkin's "everyone", as Andrew Motion has commented, "is bound to be disappointed: all people are either unloving or unloved".²⁸ A sense of the vacuum or nothingness touches our minds when we read:
An immense slackening ache,
As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,
Spreads slowly through them — that, and the voice above
Saying Dear child, and all time has disproved.

In Larkin's other poems of love, as well, we find the ironic contrast between our expectations from love and the resultant effect. There are poems like "No Roads", "If, My Darling", "Talking in Bed", where we find that the ironical juxtaposition of the ideal state in a love-affair and the exact opposite of it that we find in reality deflates the romantic notions related to love as a divine passion. Regarding the place of love in Larkin's 'scheme of values' Bruce Martin has observed:

... compared with those earlier twentieth-century poets — especially Yeats, Auden, and Thomas — ..., Larkin appears much more determined to depict love as a largely unattainable goal. He depicts the consequences of failed love not as a potentially glamorous Byronic despair, but simply as an unexciting descent back into the dull existence making up most of life. His repeated insistence that common sense need not preclude feeling and affection, indeed that it must not, makes him no more a sentimentalist than Swift or Pope, and probably constitutes a major source of the humane appeal his poems have had.29
In his poem "I Remember, I Remember", Larkin adopts the ironical technique to deflate all the romanticized and sentimentalized myths about childhood. The title of the poem ironically hits the sentimentalized remembrance of his childhood by Thomas Hood in his poem with the same title. Gary Day has seen this practice of re-using the same title as a ‘tactic’. He has noticed how the same title is adopted by the later generation of poets to emphasize the difference the new poets want to convey. Gary Day further comments that the poet uses “a literal quotation from the past in order to re-evaluate and give it a new meaning in the present.”

The persona in Larkin's poem feels that his childhood is "unspent" in his place of birth. The word "unspent" carries, as P.R. King has pointed out, a sense of a world of disillusionment where there was nothing special but just another drab and mundane life of the common man. The last line "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere" refers to the omnipresence of a nothingness. Here the irony points to the contrast existing in the myth that we create about our childhood and the actual and real state of things that were there. The irony here is cerebral in provoking us to think whether there is really something to be romanticized about childhood. What we actually lose is not the past moments of childhood, but the most precious gift, that is our innocence in this crude materialistic adult world as is evident in the last stanza of Hood's poem where he says that his true knowledge about the high trees does not
give him any pleasure or satisfaction of knowing. Larkin is perhaps the first poet to point out this fact about childhood. Philip Thody has remarked about this poem that

It is not until Philip Larkin’s ironically titled poem 'I Remember, I Remember' in 1954, with its insistence on the boredom of childhood and its acknowledgement that 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere', that the myth of the splendour of childhood started to be seen in poetry for what it can often be.\textsuperscript{32}

Larkin's other poem “Take One Home for the Kiddies” (\textit{TWW},26) also deflates the innocence attached to the children. “Living toys are something novel, / But it soon wears off somehow” refer to their insensitive nature. It is in contrast to the soft nature that we generally attribute to them. Larkin’s irony supports his sceptical view about the blessedness of childhood when he remarks on the review of a book on the lore and language of childhood that

It was that verse about becoming again as a little child that caused the first sharp waning of my Christian sympathies. If the kingdom of Heaven could be entered only by those fulfilling such a condition I know I should be unhappy there.\textsuperscript{33}

The irony that is inherent in our free choice or will is delineated in a humorous manner in the sequence of Larkin’s poems “Toads”
(TLD, 32-33), and “Toads Revisited (TWW, 18-19). Though Larkin refused to accept the second ‘toad-poem’ as a sequence to the first one, there is a thematic continuity between them. In “Toads” the persona desperately asks,

Why should I let the toad work

Squat on my life?

Can’t I use my wit as a pitchfork

And drive the brute off?

The boredom of everyday life is here felt to be oppressive, it is a cyclic repetition of the same round of activities. We can call this condition of human life as Baudelaire’s ‘ennui’, a combination of insensitivity and boredom. It is the most tragic element in modern life. Peter Nicholls has explained this complex modern psychological phenomenon:

Modern man is ‘nerve-ridden’, in Baudelaire’s phrase (BSW, 186), dominated by a ‘psychology of nerves’ and increasingly unpredictable, caught between a cult of ‘multiplied sensation’, on the one hand, and an impasse of inaction and impotence, on the other. Afflicted by this typically ‘modern’ vacillation, the axis of the self seems precarious, barely sustainable, as it is buffeted by dizzying excesses of emotion which veer from disgust to inexplicable exaltation.34
As a result of being a victim of "multiplied sensation", though he wants to get rid of routine work, he realizes that to be without any work, to be cut off from the main stream of life is not less unbearable. So he cries out,

No, give me my in-tray,
My loaf-haired secretary,
My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:

Give me your arm, old toad;...

It is the tragic irony of human existence that whenever we try to become happy by choosing something at the cost of the other, we find that our choice ironically proves out to be a wrong one. Larkin's gentle irony in this poem has ably delineated the dilemma in the human psyche.

In his other poem "Self's the Man" (TWW.24), Larkin is contrasting his life with his friend Arnold's. His description of Arnold's life is flavoured with irony and gentle humour. Arnold is a victim of the irony of fate. He wanted to be happy by getting married, but what he has got is all work, no rest, and a submission to the wishes of his wife whom "He married ... to stop her getting away / Now she's there all day, ..." At first the persona says that Arnold is "less selfish than I" as he has devoted his time to his family while the persona has remained a bachelor with no commitment. Soon he corrects his view by saying that
Arnold is not selfless as he got married “for his own sake / Playing his own game”; so “he and I are the same”. The irony and humour is so gentle that though we can realize the pathetic condition of Arnold’s life, we cannot but enjoy Larkin’s way of delineating it all. The realistic picture of Arnold’s life makes him as close to us as our next-door neighbour. Larkin’s wit and humour is as much an integral part of his conception of the ways of the world as is his sympathy for the suffering, victimized human existence in the modern mechanized world.

We can acknowledge the same function of irony in Ramanujan’s poem “Obituary” (Relations, 55). The same lines, that have been quoted in the previous Chapter to show the sceptical stance of the poet in handling the theme of the poem, can be quoted further to show how Ramanujan has delineated the tragic irony that takes place in most of the middle-class Indian families:

Father, when he passed on, left dust,
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters,

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

... he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual.
The sense of tragedy at the death of the head of the family is there; but it is ironical. At the same time it is a fact that the sons will inherit not the father's wealth but his burden. Things considered most sacred have received ironic treatment by Ramanujan when he says, "being the burning type". It may be that by using the phrase "the burning type" Ramanujan's irony here points to the meaninglessness of the differences among different sects of people about the last rites of the human body, for after death every human body will mingle with dust, whatever be the way of this transformation. William Walsh has observed that

There is a vein of melancholy in the portraits of father and mother, crisper and more ironic in that of father, more deeply sorrowful in that of mother, a cogent reminder of the power of the dead to affect the living.35

In "Self-Portrait" (The Striders, 21), we find the persona's feeling of uncertainty about his self. The persona feels that he does "resemble everyone", but to himself he is a stranger; he can know by seeing a portrait in shop-windows to be his own, by seeing the signature of his father in a corner. M.K. Naik has observed this preoccupation with the memories of family and familial relationships as a hint for a search for one's racial roots in the long run.36 We find in the poem, apart from "a search for racial roots", a subtle suggestion of the fact that is inherent in our existence, in our being: it is the compulsion
that whether we want to inherit a particular identity as a father's son or not, we have to accept it. And in accepting this identity as belonging to a particular parentage one sometimes loses one's individual identity. He remains identifiable by resembling every one but his own individual self, and abjectly remains a stranger to himself. The poem perhaps implies the meaning that in trying to assimilate ourselves with the family's identity, ironically we face the danger of losing our own individual identity. About this poem Trevor James has remarked that Ramanujan's poetry "echoes the wry irony and composed self-recognition of European imagists .... Here the language has a cool glass-like quality, it has precision and is simultaneously detached: in brief, language has become an artifact.\textsuperscript{37}

An almost similar ironical interpretation of the paradox, that lies in human existence, can be found in "Elements of Composition" (\textit{Second Sight}, 11-13) by Ramanujan. In this poem the persona states the fact that there is a reciprocity in the relationship between himself and the elements of which he is composed. He has given a list of these elements starting from "father's seed and mother's egg" and says, "I pass through them / as they pass through me / taking and leaving // affections, seeds, skeletons"; but towards the end he realizes that "even as I add, / I lose, decompose / into my elements," like a "caterpillar on a leaf, eating, / being eaten".
The ironical treatment of the themes in these poems by Larkin and Ramanujan are alike in their gentleness and sophistication. Their projection of irony as a technique of poetry has surpassed the mere trick of a poetic strategy and has enriched their poetic style irrespective of the specificity of their themes.

The presence of irony is all pervasive in the poetic world of Larkin and Ramanujan. The poems where they have dealt with the contemporary scenes and events in their respective countries show that they are very much conscious about the seriousness of their vocation. Though Larkin expresses his stress on 'pleasure principle' in literature, his irony cannot but be bitter while showing his disappointment at the changing scenario of his country. In “MCMXIV” (TWW, 28) his tone is ironical when he says,

And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day; ...

But his disappointment at the interfering of the modern artificial culture is clear when he sadly says, “Never such innocence, / ... Never such innocence again”. In his other poem “Essential Beauty” (TWW, 42) we find an ironical contrast projected by the juxtaposition of reality and the allurements of perfection that the advertisements of the commercial
world display before us. The large frames of the advertisements
"screen graves with custard", "cover slums with praise / Of motor-oil",
"High above the gutter / A silver knife sinks into golden butter". The
repetition of the adjective 'pure' in the second stanza ("pure crust, pure
foam", "Pure coldness") ironically refers to the impurity that pervades
the modern commercialized world.

In "Going, Going" (HW, 21-22) Larkin foreshadows the danger of
rapid industrialization of the country side. All the natural beauty of
England will vanish and it is the irony of situation that

There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all the remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

It is tragic and at the same time ironical that while we are rushing
madly for more comfort and more developments, we are losing our
naturalness.

It is worthwhile exploring the amazing scope of irony in Larkin's
poetry that pervades from the life of the 'common man' like Arnold to
the gravity and seriousness of the contemporary social and political
occurrences. In "Homage to a Government" (HW, 29), Larkin expresses
his disapproval and distaste over the Labour Government's decision in
1968 to reduce military expenditure:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Here the persona's voice is apparently calm. The underlying irony in the immediate expression, "Places they guarded, or kept orderly, / Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly", is evident. The repetition of the phrase "all right" hints to the fact that nothing is right. Here Larkin's irony arouses his anger, rather than his sadness at the crumbling integrity of Britain. The country which used to be the epitome of culture has now become a centre for materialistic pursuits.

The poet's dissatisfaction at the human indifference towards the other living beings can be seen in Ramanujan's poems, "Breaded Fish" (The Striders.5) and "A River" (The Striders.36-37). In the poem "Breaded Fish", the persona is not being able to take the taste of the fish which is covered by bread, because it reminds him of a dead lady who was lying on the sea-shore all covered with the sand of the sea-shore. The "grained indifference of the sand" obliquely hints at the indifference of human beings towards the pathos of actual life. It is ironical that the persona who could not or did not do anything for the dead woman at that time, is now sacrificing the breaded fish specially prepared for him because the memory of that scene haunts him.

In the poem "A River" Ramanujan's irony cannot but be bitter towards the neglect of the individuals by human beings. The "river which dries to a trickle / in the sand, / baring the sand-ribs", the poets sing "only of the floods" of that river which "has water enough / to be poetic / about only once a year...." The new poets quote the old poets
but nobody refers to the pregnant woman and the cows who were carried away by the river. M.K. Naik has marked this poem as an example of an "unquestioning acceptance of tradition" which is one of the several limitations of the Hindu view of life. Regarding the insensitive attitude of the poets Naik further ironically remarks,

> The proper subject-matter and the right technique for poetry have evidently been codified and no divagation from it is permissible, even if it means shutting one's eyes to the stark realities of life.38

But Ramanujan's irony is more bitter and pungent in his poems "Shadows", "Bosnia", and "A Report", that are included in his fourth volume of poems named *The Black Hen* and published posthumously. In these poems Ramanujan's irony is directed to the insensitive and degenerated mind of the modern man. The last stanza of "Shadows" *(Collected Poems, 199)* clearly reveals the bitterness of the irony:

> War heroes return in special trains covered with blood and flags. They blow bugles at home, brawl in pubs, and bark orders at dogs, kill and flay twenty-one nurses and hang one from a maple.

The ironical contrast in the behavior of the war heroes who are supposed to protect the people of the country, hits at the contemporary situation when man cannot dare to depend on or trust in others. In
"Bosnia" (Collected Poems, 247), and "A Report" (Collected Poems, 248-249), Ramanujan's irony is full of sadness while describing the state of affairs and the condition of human life in the insensitive modern world. The loss of values in the modern world has been hinted ironically; the past heroes Stalin, Lenin have lost their significance, and "Gandhi and King / are black and white photographs smiling // away in bidi shops" ("A Report"). In these poems Ramanujan's irony surpasses the limited spheres of family and relations and his native country; here irony attains a sense of universality in showing the all-pervading degeneration of moral values and in its turn, of the modern world as a whole.

V

After an elaborate exploration and discussion on the place of irony in the poetry of Larkin and Ramanujan, one question inevitably comes to our mind; that is, what are the successes that the modern poets have achieved by using irony as a technique to express their world view? Or has it (irony) at all helped them in achieving any success in their vocation? We know that the modern man is inevitably exposed to contradictory forces and is well-nigh incapable of seeing things in an innocent way. The 'game of irony' is now inevitably involved with the seriousness of purpose and theme of the creative
As Linda Hutcheon observes, “irony may be the only way we can be serious today”. The modern man has experienced so much bitterness in the world that the ironical interpretation of things comes to his mind spontaneously. So he has gained ‘modernity’ at the cost of his simplicity. And, as a result, as Hamburger has aptly observed:

Paradox and irony are no longer the clowning of a divided self; they have become part of a vision of human existence as a whole, and all references to the poet's personal predicament illustrative of a wider concern with the cruelty and fortuitousness of life.

Now he is able to grasp several layers of significance of a single phenomenon and wants to accommodate them simultaneously. Here irony helps his poetry to become many-dimensional. But in such poems, as the poet's identity is expected to remain detached, there has to be a coherence among all the many-dimensions of the poem that can give an authenticity to the meaning of the poem as a whole. Otherwise all the layers of meaning would be warring. But the modern mind itself is so perplexed that to attain coherence in art is not only difficult, but is next to impossible. The first part Eliot's *The Waste Land* can be taken as an example where, as Rainer Emig has pointed out,

The arrangement of irreconcilable elements, .. each with its own paradigmatic shadow, devalues every possible meaning and taints it with irony. By stressing both its
metonymic collage and its multi-layered structure, the text continuously avoids fixed point of view, a textual identity. Like echoes in a complex building, the effect makes the speaker always seem somewhere else. Every utterance becomes equally inauthentic, a mere quotation.42

But 'detached'ness need not produce inauthenticity, and 'multilayered' meanings need not lack coherence. This limitation of modern poetry differentiates it from the great literature of the world, say, the great tragedies of Shakespeare as King Lear, Othello, or Macbeth. In these great works we find that the detached tragic irony of the artist at first is limited to a particular person or a particular couple, but towards the end, it surpasses the local limits and reaches to the summit of a universal appeal having a perennial value. We will take King Lear for explaining this point. We find several layers of ironical meaning in the play. The complexity in the relationship between Lear and his daughters points to the ironical contrast that sometimes occurs in parent-child relationship. Again, it is a paradox that when Lear becomes mad, his words more powerfully express his wisdom. But when he was sane, he failed to differentiate his good daughter from his bad ones. But the most touching tragic irony occurs in the moment when Lear condemns himself for his own crime. One of the Shakespeare critics, Terence Hawkes has found a larger irony here
when "The great wielder and advocate of reason has begun to lose his own hold on precisely that faculty". Above all these ironical shades, the play remains as John Holloway writes, an example of the "facets of that universal disruption of Nature, that Descent into Chaos, which for millennia had been a standing dread of mankind and at the same time one of mankind's convictions about providential history in the future". The universal appeal of the play lies in Lear's learning the value of love and humility by making himself free from the bondage of ego and selfhood. In this play, as in the other plays, Shakespeare's characters are very much convincing and they register their creator's involvement with their feelings, but at the same time, Shakespeare maintained a detached stance from his subject-matter and the play as a whole represents a world-view in a collective universal manner instead of a subjective projection of the creator's impressions. Shakespeare's irony attains the status of a serene, and higher insight through the plays' "detached acceptance of the eternal opposition of life and spirit, the ironical (in a more sceptical sense) and the radical".

But while discussing irony in the present context, we have to remember that at the time of Sophocles or Shakespeare, the connotation of irony was different. George Steiner's book The Death of Tragedy (1961) rightly argues that there is something in modern society which prevents the modern writers from producing tragedy in the sense which the word has traditionally had when used in a literary
context. We share the view that Philip Thody expresses supporting the argument of Steiner:

Steiner's argument is based on the idea that we lack the reverence for sacred and transcendent values which was an outstanding feature of the cultures which, like fifth-century Athens and Renaissance Europe, originally gave birth to tragedy.

What Steiner and Thody say about European literature can be applicable to world literature as a whole. With the emergence of bourgeois and industrialization, both the innocence and idealism of man, as also the sense of the sacred have fled.

However, when we come to the poetry of Eliot or Yeats we find that both these eminent poets have used irony in their poems. But the irony that is present in Eliot's *The Waste Land* or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and in Yeats's "Second Coming", though it has emanated from human life itself, lacks the 'radical' or total imagination of Shakespeare that has made him a great artist. Yeats's "The Second Coming" depicts the fall of Christianity and prophesies the coming of a new civilization. But here the inherent subjectivity of the poem, the weighty presence of the artist himself prevents the poem from depicting an actual universal predicament.
In a later period, we find that the poetry of Larkin and Ramanujan are enriched by their ironical remarks; they do not deviate from their aim of expressing the manifold nature of the ambiguity present in the modern world and in the human existence itself. They remarkably reach to the heart of the matter. But still we cannot but acknowledge the fact that the poetry of Larkin and Ramanujan cannot reach the pitch of great poetry. They do not even, we can say, have the popular command that Eliot's and Yeats's poetry enjoyed. One reason may be that the poetry of either Larkin or Ramanujan does not manifest a comprehensive world view or reveal a larger perspective. They appear to be fragmentary records of their creators' experiences and the projection of their own impressions about the ambivalent ways of the world. Another reason may be that both Larkin and Ramanujan have shown the ambiguity or irony prevailing in the world of existence, but have failed to have a significant insight into the modern predicament.