CHAPTER-THREE
IRONIC VISION

A deep awareness of life informs Ramanujan's art, which needs no re-statement. Each poem of *Second Sight*, is replete with irony. Ramanujan's irony is multi-faceted and of an all-pervasive nature. The family themes and the belief-systems, the socio-political mores and the half-forgotten realities of life: all come within his ironic purview. The poems in these three volumes reflect, of course, Ramanujan's individual excellence in his use of irony as a technique, but more significantly they reveal that his vision of life is ironic also. Do his ironic views on the family relations point to him as an alienated mind? Or, does he wield irony as a moral shaft? Is he a carping ironist, merely? Or, does his ironic perception of the Hindu ethics and ideals represent him as an atheistic existentialist? These are some of the questions which need to be answered as we study Ramanujan's irony which pervades his vision.

Self as the centre of life as we know informs Ramanujan's art as well as his vision. If life's "reasons gyring within reasons" arouse his humility, inspire him to quest for the self; its oddities as found in the mores and manners of men, in their ethos, inspire also his ironic intent. Thus Ramanujan's realism and irony both play their parts in shaping his vision.

His vision of the self is as serious as Bergson's; his vision of the man-woman relationship is as creative as Lawrence's, but in a way, all his own. However, his awareness of the life's oddities, deep embedded in it, as Lawrence is aware, leads him to accord a due place to these strange,odd elements in life.
recognition of their values is not only found in the man-woman relationship, but also in ethos, in culture which shapes man's vision. Without living an ethos, none can be able to realise the vision of its life. If one is prompted to ask whether Ramanujan has realised the vision of his ethos, my answer is that Ramanujan has reached his goal in this. Not only has he realised this vision, but also lived this vision, nay, this vision remains the way of his living the life. He had not lived it, he could not have written two of his love poems: "Love Poem for a Wife 2" and "Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees". In this context, one may be reminded of the fact (Chapter-two) that Ramanujan comes to live an essentially Lawrentian vision of the man-woman relationship, that pure relatedness between man and woman, each seeking fulfilment in the other. And we know that the image of woman becomes a complex and "whole" symbol, whole in the sense that a woman is whole as a man is whole, playing the changing roles to create the "trembling equilibrium", that "quick", that pure relatedness in every nimble moment of life. May be, this vision of the dear woman becoming mother, daughter, sexpot, sister and Indian village wife is alien to Lawrence, but not alien to a Hindu view of woman. And in a very subtle way, Ramanujan is also qualitatively different from Lawrence, i.e. if Lawrence lives the "dark" god, Ramanujan lives his Siva. Siva is more complete than the dark god, even Siva is the wholeness, because Siva is the Complete Principle, being half-man "half-woman contained in a common body". Siva is His own complete self. But for man, as for Ramanujan, this completeness is to be realised only in a vanishing "dream", in a nimble moment, evanescent
instant. If Siva being "whole in the ambivalence", being complete in all self-contradictions, were not the vision of Ramanujan, how could Ramanujan live his whole being without living the oddities that are deeply buried in his being, and for that matter, buried in an ethos, as well as in life? To be a little clear, Ramanujan does not live the oddities themselves, he longs to live the pure state that is born out of a creative fusion of all contraries; of good and evil mingled completely; of odds and evens fused wholly. And this blissful state of creative fusion is revealed to men who are at an acme of life, this is revealed but in a sudden moment. This is to say again that the odds and the evens of life, more often than not, reveal their glaring differences to our consciousness, to our ordinary eyes even. And the artist whose life is all a struggle for wholeness, poses naturally to be ironical of the odd beats of life, of the oddities in an ethos, in a literary tradition, too. And here is an artist, A.K. Ramanujan, an unknown Indian, who has come out with his vision of the Self, in a way all his own, that comes resonant in his poetry. Another delicate meaning of life is also embodied in the symbol of Siva as Ramanujan comes to realise Him at different moments. If His complete principle as revealed in "Love Poem for a Wife 2" is Ramanujan's lived goal, His incomplete image as revealed to the artist in "Compensations"-R becomes the butt of the artist's irony. Therefore, irony, at least for Ramanujan, is not such a tool as ideal for an alien mind, estranged from his ethos, which Ramanujan is not. With our general view of how Ramanujan’s irony is fundamental to his vision, we would attempt a detailed discussion on his attitude to the religious beliefs
of men, with sweeping reflections on his ironical view of the Hindu family traditions. Because the Hindu family traditions which are a way for Ramanujan to live his vision as well as a way to recognise the oddities inherent in such and other traditions have been discussed in Chapter One.

"Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House" is a representative poem of Ramanujan on his family themes as well as on the Hindu family traditions. A traditional Hindu family is a joint family with a complex network of relations. Ramanujan's ironic thrusts enliven each and every aspect of this "great house", and also brings out the essential qualities of its tradition. This tradition is great in naturalising the alien, but ironically it is also great in its own absurdities. Within this tradition also, as Ramanujan looks at it, the life shoots, grows and changes. And an example of the oddities of this great heritage is the history of the "little aunts" ("History"), which reveals in a tell-tale manner that human cruelty is buried deep in life, but it shows itself only in certain moments, "during a single conversation". Ramanujan's irony pierces his "petite little aunts" for their cruelty towards their own mother on her death bed. But why should the poet come ironically on his "great aunt"?

and the dark
stone face of my little aunt
acquired some expression
at last.

Mark the ironic shift in attributive epithets from "great aunt" to "little aunt". He could have sentimentalised at least the death of his poor aunt. One way of understanding Ramanujan here
is his vision is not tragic, but ironic; and the other way of our getting at his meaning is that sympathy and irony are both mixed and mingled. Thus, this is the vision that informs his "Obituary", which is half understood by almost all the critics, to date Ramanujan's critical attitude to the Hindu rites, as detailed in "Obituary" at his father’s funeral, has been taken so far as the artist's total expression of his disillusionment with this ethos. I feel like asking myself why Ramanujan can not simply say that he is disenchanted with this ethos; and why he is invoking the rituals in their particular nuances; why again he troubles himself with a search for "obituary lines" on the dead man, who is dead and gone. When his father is gone off the scene, for ever, left "one more annual ritual" behind: whether Ramanujan has accepted this ritual or not, is also another question raising in my mind. Answer to all this tangle of questions is simple, i.e. Ramanujan's ironic awareness of life is a way of living his vision. He does not discard the unhealthy growths in his ethos, by this it is not meant that he has not disregarded them. If he discards, his voice will be moralising, or akin to it, which Ramanujan, the artist, is certainly not doing. Our dwelling on the subject, a little more may be better revealing.

History
which usually
changes slowly,
changes sometimes
during a single conversation.

Ramanujan is certainly aware of the much-repeated, oft-quoted expression 'history repeats itself'. But he does not repeat this
meaning in his "History"—R. He means that history "changes" as memory "changes", as time "changes", as the self "changes". All changes. The change is noticeable over a period of time, or it may be revealed "during a single conversation". And in this change, there is a continuation of the old as well as a qualitative difference in our experience. This phenomenon of life is the creative evolution: it is true for Bergson, true for Ramanujan. But Ramanujan’s vision is all his own, in the sense that irony percolates into the Bergsonian vision, which is undoubtedly Ramanujan’s also (Chapter Two).

The point is why Ramanujan the artist does not simply state his hypothesis "history .. changes .. during a single conversation". The reason is that Ramanujan is not a historian: and that, art is not a biographical or autobiographical document, nor a philosophical statement. Art, all real art, one means, is a living, or if one prefers, an intelligent living, for the critic to come to his conclusion, if any. But it is the life for the artist to live it fully in order to realise his vision which he reveals in his art. This is the reason why the history of the "petite little aunts" is re-enacted in "History"—R: this is the reason why "Obituary" is sort of invocation of the rituals. Ramanujan the artist has lived them before coming to realise his vision. Therefore, all art has an unspoken demand on the readers that it be lived intelligently, before they hastily pass "a sentence" on it. And it is the reason why Ramanujan’s art has not been understood fully, so far.

Within this perspective of Ramanujan’s art, his ironic attitude to life, to ethos, to tradition, has its real value; within this perspective, his comic irony to understand the
absurdities of life needs to be valued. The comic absurdity of life is found in a wonderful, lively manner in three great "Love Poems for a Wife..." of Ramanujan. In "Love Poem for a Wife 1"-R, Ramanujan suggests two ironical solutions to the basic problem of alienation between man and woman, which read:

Probably
only the Ezyptians had it right: their kings had sisters for queens to continue the incests of childhood into marriage.
Or we should do as well-meaning hindus did, betroth us before birth, forestalling separate horoscopes and mothers' first periods, and wed us in the oral cradle and carry marriage back into the namelessness of childhoods.

This problem of man-woman alienation, as resolved in an ambivalent wholeness in "Love Poem for a Wife 2"-R, and this resolution being realised as the ultimate vision of life, which is in a way, all Ramanujan's own, in "Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees"-SS, neatly describe Ramanujan's growth of the vision of the self. But with this growth, this lived vision, Ramanujan has all along brought his irony to play upon, to percolate into, to pervade this vision. Ramanujan thus brings within his irony both man and woman, himself and herself in their creative contritions.
in their creative adaptations to their roles in reciprocal changeability.

Ramanujan has his comic expenses at himself in many of his poems. Because he has to keep his self open, alive and changing, otherwise he may reduce his vision to a state of sentimentality. In "Highway Stripper"-55, it is seen how his ironic thrusts on a stripper on the highway change their direction and point at the observer-persona himself. Again, a moment of the self-exploration makes the irony more piercing:

was it me
moulting, shedding
vestiges,
old investments,
rushing forever
towards a perfect
coupling
with naked nothing
in a world
without places?

In the "Second Sight"-55, this self-pointed irony rather reveals its comic element. When asked by a westerner of the Hindoos' "second sight", the Hindoo persona gropes ironically for his ordinary sight. The image of a "nightblind son-in-law" in this absurd situation is apt in making irony more effective: the persona gropes

like night blind
son-in-law
in every room for his wife,
and strike a light to regain
at once my first and only
sight.
A comic irony as found in "Second Sight" and a sardonic kind of irony as noticed in "Highway Stripper" both the kinds are present in some of Ramanujan's poems, particularly in "Alien"-SS. Here a dramatic imagination, and a metaphysical style of bringing disparate images together, shape Ramanujan's ironic thrust:
  While the mother-world turns somersaults,
  ... 
as her body shapes under water
  a fish with gills into a baby
  with a face
  getting ready to make faces.
But in a final ironic contrast, the baby would soon
  fold and mutilate
  a paper world in search of identity cards.
However, a dramatic irony is at its best in "Still Another View of Grace". The poem emerges out of a pattern created by a series of contrasts in terms of ideas as well as images, and a mode of all-pervasive irony holds such a pattern.

It is increasingly clear that with Ramanujan the artist, irony is not only a mode of looking at some incongruity between what is said and what is meant, but also it is a way of living one's life, one's being, one's vision, which is partly realised by us while reflecting on "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House" in the present chapter with respect to Ramanujan's alienation from his ethos. To put it another way, the creative correspondence between irony and ethos in Ramanujan's art justified by many more
references to the images of Plotinis and Alexander, the processed clothes from Manchester and the Ganges water for the dying old men of the family.

The virtues of Indian ethos come to the fore and irony is a helpful tool: Madras, 1965, and rain.

Head clerks from city banks curse, batter, elbow ... coolies in their scramble for the single seat in the seventh bus: they tell each other how Old King Harsha’s men beat soft gongs to stand a crowd of ten thousand monks in a queue, to give them and the single visiting Chinaman a hundred pieces of gold, a pearl, and a length of cloth; so, miss another bus, the eight, and began to walk, for King Harsha’s monks had nothing but their own two feet. ("Some Indian Uses of History on A Rainy Day"—R)

Ramanujan’s irony flays the head clerks from Madras city banks for their greed of money, for their talking wise when they themselves
are unruly and foolish. Ramanujan by means of ironic contrasts brings out the qualitative difference between the head clerks of Madras and the monks of Harsha, the King. But what escapes our notice is how Ramanujan’s positive appreciation measures on the lines "Old King Harsha’s men .... and a length of cloth", that is to say, Ramanujan’s ironic eyes do not dismiss the merits of a tradition, rather they recognise them. Similarly, the millennia of Calicut muslim" with which the mummies are swathed becomes a sarcastic comment on the "fulbright Indians" with "tiepins of ivory, colour cameras for eyes", who are obvious of their ethos but press their faces against "museum glasses" to have a look on these mummies. An ignorance of the solid traditional values, as found in a Professor of Sanskrit who goes to Berlin "on cultural exchange" but ironically takes the Nazi "swastika" for its Hindu counterpart, also invites Ramanujan’s ironic weapon to a flourish.

From another perspective, a tradition of the poets who "sing of cities and temples" comes for criticism from the poet. When this poetic tradition, undesirable in its sterile growth, since "the old poets" till the new poets", is of course ironically commented upon; but the merits of the Sangam tradition (chapter-one) as well as of the Kannada classics, it is noticed, have profoundly shaped his creativity and given him an individual confidence of belonging to the tradition. In the poem "A River", the poet-persona infuses a fresh breath into the sterile tradition, by acknowledging into poetry the usual heppings in the wake of floods, that carry off "three village houses, one pregnant woman and a couple of cows named Gopi and Brinda, as usual".
Here also, Ramanujan comes to our view as an ironist-realist. Indeed, if "the ordinariness of most events"\(^1\), is what moulds Ezckiel’s art; to Ramanujan, the "usual" is also the wonderful, in the sense that the usual is often experienced but not often thought of, not often reflected upon. In "Army Ants"\(^2\), his appreciation for the ants and their "aristocratic tastes" and their sacrifices, however small, that we usually do not see becomes an ironic turn-down at us. The poet grieves that unlike the slaves and enemies who are gone "cemented" on the "Great China Wall", the little ants are but "without legends", though they, "living", "young" and old alike, go into the making of "the brick and the mortar of this home". Mark the ironic contrast:

And the work,
as they say, is the workman at last.

Thus, the half-forgotten realities of life go into producing an ironic awareness in Ramanujan, which affirms his sense of doing merit to the deserving: whatever it may be, the ants or the ethos; the mangy old bitch with a life-affirming side to her or a rickshaw puller whose "hands are literate" and whose chest is broad for taking other women. It is Amanuddin who in a comparative study states: "Ramanujan explores the ordinary and common place with their subtle meanings. He is interested in the poetic treatment of passionate desires, but this he does usually with the cold detachment of an intellectual"\(^2\). However, this cold detachment of an intellectual when flavoured with irony, which is a usual process with Ramanujan, does not remain 'cold' but turns to taste.
Around Ramanujan's "Hindoo" poems that is markedly seen is a network spread of confusions and criticism, curiosities and disatisfactions. One of the reasons for such speculations is that he is a born Hindu and faith a "saivite", but he is critical of many tenets of the Hindu belief-systems. Another reason might be his ambivalence towards the Hindu gods.

While referring to Ramanujan's Hindu faith, H.M. Williams is aware of his deep sense of guilt pervading "Still Another View of Grace", but to the critic again, Ramanujan appears as the most "intriguing" of the Indo-Anglian poets. Whereas, to M.K. Naik's mind, Ramanujan's articulation of the Hindu ethos has so far produced the "poetry of periphery and not exactly the centre of the Hindu experience". But William Walsh sees that Ramanujan is "deeply possessed of ... the Indian ethos and psyche in its pure Hindu form". Walsh's criticism is in part correct and in part superficial. Whereas, Naik's critical view is seized with an obsessive quality, because he wants more of the Hindu in Ramanujan than that what the poet has to offer. To my mind, it consistently appears that for Ramanujan to be a "pure" Hindu is not to be an essential man, because Ramanujan values the essential man in him more than "the" Hindu in him. As an artist he is on the side of life, first and foremost, a life which is stripped of all garbs and not on the side of life which conforms to some dogmas. When his heart despair, he can wear no mask to hide his feelings. His inordinate passion for the truth in life necessitates his remaining at the centre of experience, the experience of a human being, not of a religious man.
Ramanujan's encounter with "the prehistoric yellow of a goat" on the face of a little boy in his innocent childhood, reveals the essential man in him. The childhood supposed to be an epitome of innocence and goodness, incongruously, however, houses the "prehistoric" desire of sex, which is more ancient than the ancient Gita, more elemental than the passion for knowledge. Even an awareness of such incongruities finds expression in "The Hindoo: the ONLY Risk" (Chapter-One). The poet here also brings us home to a fact that the man within "the Hindoo" is a normal, spontaneous self who is burdened with religious preachings. But to be the Hindoo which all Hindu scriptures expect man to conform to, is for Ramanujan, to become untrue to his essential self. This essential self and Ramanujan's vision of it have been probed into at length in Chapter Two. The essential self shoots, grows and changes. It is in its creative evolution, which means ceaseless creation as well as continuous change. While it evolves and changes, it creatively adapts to the outward forces acting on it and shaping it. Therefore, to realize the essential self, one has to open oneself out to the wider world, to the ambient universe. Every moment of this circumambient universe has a subtle, inventive, creative bearing on the essential self. The question, therefore, whether Ramanujan is "a" hindu or "the hindu, is answered, here. Because to be "the hindu is not to be one's essential self; the"hindu is like a closed house, and a closed house is like an island, isolated from all contacts which give life and meaning to its existence.

We may now consider Desai's standpoint that represents Ramanujan as an atheistic existentialist. Ramanujan's critical view of the Hindu ethos and particularly his ironic attitude
to the Lord Murugan, as the critic finds, are the firm signs of the artist, which prove him to be an existentialist. For Desai, Ramanujan has "no love" "no faith", no bhakti"⁶ to express in his Murugan poems. The critic casts the "Prayers to Lord Murugan" in the shadow of an "existentialist angst", and characterises the artist's "world-view" as "atheistic existentialism without Sartre's ethical passion"⁷. Our answer to Desai will be given in two parts: first, Ramanujan is an artist of ambivalent wholeness. Secondly, his art does not conform to Sartre's "Ontology". Desai happens to find only "irony" and "existential angst" in Ramanujan, while he discusses the artist's "Prayers to Lord Murugan", "A Lapse of Memory", "On Memory" and other poems of no importance to reflect his views. There is irony in the Murugan poems, one agrees, but irony is not a mere tool to cut Ramanujan's umbilical cord that connects him with his ethos, his ancestors (Chapter One) and with his Murugan, the lord, who is the ancestral Dravidian god, with six faces and twelve hands, who is the god of love, fertility, youth, joy, war and dance. What Dionysus symbolises for the ancient Greek as well as the modern artists of the western civilisation to-day, Murugan symbolises that for the Dravidians and more so for Ramanujan, a modernist. But there is a difference between the great moderns and Ramanujan, that is, Ramanujan while seeking the essential man in his prayers to the lord, becomes ironical of Him.

Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand
in our fight
with the furit fly,

... Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.
Deliver us n presence
from proxies
and absences
from sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and several
round table mornings
of London and return
the future to what
it was. (italics mine).

In the first two quotations from "Prayers to Lord Murugan" the signs of "existential angst" are apparent. But what my italics reveal is prayer mixed with irony. Ramanujan also in his interview to Rama Jha has confessed that he has learned this technique of mixing irony with prayer from his Kannad mystics. But the question arises, where is Ramanujan’s essential man? Is he in the history which is shaped by "the several round table mornings of London"? Is he in the "sanskrit and the mythologies" as we, modern Indians know today, though we hardly understand them? Ramanujan’s essential man of "five senses" belongs to a time of the "sanskrit and the mythologies of night", a time when man was all himself. And this is the reason why Ramanujan prays to God to "return the future to what it was". Ramanujan does never ask of the "Lord of solutions" for ready made, handy solutions
to man facing the problems of existence, today in our modern
time. He only asks: "Lord of solutions,/teach us to dissolve and not to drown"; "give us birth" to live the life, and no salvation.

    Lord of answers
    cure us at once
    of prayers.

The artist not only asks, here, for the strength and the hand in self-responsibility, but also asks for the power that would make him himself. A close look on the above mentioned lines would reveal another contour of the poet’s mind. Why can not he pray: God, **grant** us at once our "prayers"? or "cure" us at once of **diseases**? Why such a prayer: "cure us at once of prayers"? Does it reveal only an ironic mind of the artist? But to me, it appears that Ramanujan suggests or means, prayer is a sort of or, a state of want like disease. Because so long as man is not whole, he offers prayers to be whole. Thus here is an artist who wants to be himself as God is Himself. Can one now say Ramanujan has "love", "faith", "bhakti" and all? As things are in the "Prayers to Lord Murugan", there is no definite answer to such a query. For this, we are to go to Ramanujan’s other sources. The poem "Difference"—SS throws light on the question awaiting an answer:

    But today, out of the blue,
    when Vishnu
    came to mind, the Dark One you know
    . . .
    and as I stare at this left toe and toenail
    weighing on my hand, I can tell perhaps
the height
of this image as elephant trainers can
the height and gender of a runaway
elephant
by the size of his footprint in wet grass,

("The Difference"-SS)

The analogy between the clay-toy maker (poet-persona) and the
elephant trainers can only mean at its simplest a familiarity with
the objects or professions of their love. Orelse, why should
Vishnu come to the poet-persona's thought? And if Ramanujan
has no love, no bhakti, how could he "tell the height of this
image"? Because, his knowledge of the god's "height" presupposes
his love; love is a state of intimacy. If he could guess the
god's height, in a sense, is proud of such knowledge as the
elephant trainers are, he soon despairs at his own inability to
know other things. The self-pity of the persona is fully exposed,
and, on the other hand, humility is what intersperses the lines:
"but I know I've no way at all of telling/the look,/ if any, on
his face, or of catching/the rumoured beat of his extraordinary
heart".

Humility characterises all the prayers in "Prayers to Lord
Murugan". If prayers are shadowed by irony, they are not totally
exterminated by it. By combining prayer with irony, as Ramanujan
admits, he could be best related to his Kannada saints of the
medieval period. If there is no bhakti in Ramanujan, there arises
no need for him to call on the Lord Murugan, no need for him to
pray on his son's "hour of change" ("Mouling'"-SS): no need for
him to offer prayers to the God Incarnate in "Zoo Gardens Revisited" so that the zoo animals are saved within "the zoo garden ark of (his) belly". However, this humility loses itself into irony, while Ramanujan's awareness of the predicament of man turns bitter. The memory of the World Wars and the vicious atmosphere they created for us shapes his irony in "Compensation".

Both the modern man and the Hindu god of war, Siva are ironically observed in the poem.

... the three eyed
whirlwind of arms, dancing on
a single leg though he can dance
on many, kind returning god
of Indian deluges,
dying from time to time
of sheer fatigue, leaving
the technicalities of war,
famine, riot and the rest
to us, two-handed two-legged normal us,
in a periodic transfer of powers.

"The technicalities of war" and other devastations, of which the modern man is capable, surpass the war-god, in a far greater destructibility. But there is a qualitative difference between man and god, and their mastery of the destructive crafts. Siva, in his taandav, the war-dance on the occasion of a sad demise of Parvati, his consort, produced "war, famine, riot and the rest", beheaded Daksha Prajapati, his own father-in-law and brought the entire creation into a turmoil of destruction. Supplicated by the gods and their worship and sacrifices, Siva came to his normal sense
and restored the world as well as a head to Daksha (Chapter One). That is why, the poet has an appreciation, for the god, that sneaks in the line" ... though he can dance on many, kind returning god of Indian deluges ...". But the modern man is only destructive; though he has horrible powers, he has no "miracle of grace" to make amends. The title of the poem, "Compensations", has its ironical import that informs the entire body of the poem. We may recall how Ramanujan realises his wholeness in a dream vision, realises his Siva, the symbol of complete principle (Chapter One and Two). Then, how could Siva be, at one time, a god of ruins and at another, the god of completeness? Is Ramanujan confusing the Hindu god or confusing himself? Nevertheless, Ramanujan confuses neither. He remains true to his essential self as Siva remains true to His. In the flux of life, Self takes many roles, many forms; undergoes many changes and many evolutions. If this is what Ramanujan does not say, he must not have thought of or, shaped his art the way that could be imaginable in terms of the Bergsonian paradigm. And furthermore, he must not have written a poem, "Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees", which points to his opening out to the image of woman not only as the woman, but also as mother, sister, daughter and seductress at different creative moments of the life, at ambivalently whole moments of the self. Therefore, ambivalence is all that describes Ramanujan's attitude to the life, to the Hindu gods, to himself. Ambivalence, of course, is a state of contradictions for ordinary humans like us; but for Ramanujan, it is a state of creative fusion of the contraries, of the odd and the even, of the good and the evil. And this fusion, the state of wholeness is not to be eternally
caught, nor can it be fossilized like a museum piece for everybody's pass-time. All it happens is in the flux of life. All that is meant is that Ramanujan is an artist of ambivalent wholeness. His god is also "whole in the ambivalence, balancing stillness in the middle of a duel to make it dance."

From this observation, we now come to the other area of our investigation, i.e. whether Ramanujan's art fits into Sartre's existentialist Ontology. At times, it appears that Ramanujan resembles an existentialist, but the resemblance is on the surface; while in essence, the existentialism and Ramanujan's art are apart from each other. That is why, our purpose is to focus this essential difference, for, we are concerned with Ramanujan's essential man, or for that matter, with his essential vision. Speaking in a very general manner, one could observe that Sartre's ontology spells out the dialectic relation between the essential realms of being, the pour-soi and the en-soi. In Sartre's doctrine, the "pour-soi" is "consciousness" in "the most simple sense", and this "pour-soi" is in a state of perpetual flight. To Sartre, the flight of consciousness is a state born out of fear, the fear of being swallowed up by the "en-soi", because the "en-soi" is the very "in-ness" of our being, which by its nature has a dark tendency to absorb all conscious "pour-soi". Therefore, anguish is born of our being. For Ramanujan as for Bergson, consciousness is in a state of flux; whereas, for Sartre, it is in a state of flight. The apparently identical concepts are different in essence. While fear and anguish characterise Sartre's ontology, inventive adaptation and intelligent co-operation define Ramanujan's evolution of the self. According to Sartre, "... anguish is the mode
of being of freedom as consciousness of beings it is in anguish that freedom is in its being in question for itself. And the idea of Sartre's "nothingness" has no correspondence with any of Ramanujan's vitalist ideas. Nothingness or annihilation, as Sartre means, is not only immanent in "Being" but also its very condition. Whereas, for Ramanujan, the creative evolution of the self means change, growth and maturity. It is apparent from our small-scale observations on a great subject like Sartrean Ontology that the oft-made charge of nihilism and defeatism against existentialism has a validity, which can not be levelled against Ramanujan's vision of the essential man. Therefore, Desai's critical stance on Ramanujan's world view is wrong. Again, for Sartre, morality is a question of choice, because man is free to choose and free to act. But his man being "condemned to be free" is also a basic premise in Sartre's ethical and moral framework, while, Ramanujan's essential man lives from moment to moment, appropriating the moral or ethical values, which are, of course, naturally lived. Thus, to define Ramanujan's art by the common parameters of morality or atheism or theism is to wrong his idea of ambivalent wholeness. But interestingly enough, Desai while framing the vignette of Ramanujan in an existential framework, fails to see "Anxiety" which may correspond to the difference between existential anguish and fear: "anxiety can find no metaphor to end it". But it is wrong to generalise the vision of an artist, by drawing on his poems or examples which are few and which really do not shape his vision.

Moreover, why talk of Ramanujan's irony in relation to his ethos, his Hindu beliefs only? Ramanujan has poems which reveal
his ironic attitude to the Jaina, Budhist and Christian ways of
life, thought and philosophy.

In the poem, "pleasure"-SS, a naked Jaina monk, a lifelong
celebrate in accordance with the golden precepts of Jainism, is
dissected by Ramanujan's typical methods of an ironic open opera-
tion. The surgery brings to light the monk's "several mouths
thirsting for breast
buttocks, smells of fingers
long hair, short hair."

Ramanujan's ironic device is most devastating here. Even the
sacred, cool Ganges turns "sensual" on him, smearing" his own
private untouchable Jaina body". But in an ironic anticlimax
with the monk's masochistic climb onto an ant-hill, it is observed
how the ants tattoo him and reach his body "once naked, once even
intangible". Ramanujan's lampoon at the Jaina monk also indirectly
affirms his faith in the body, which is aligned to his vital vision
of the self. Further, a Budhist, Chicago Zen in "Chicago Zen"-SS
is also brought into the satiric gallows but from a different
angle. The poet-persona here as nowhere else, comes as an authoric
interpolar: "watch your step, watch it, I say". The sarcasm is
built out of juxtaposing the images of diverse values and meanings
One set of the prehistric images - a frothing Himalayan river,
crawling lake Michigan, a lobster louse, the Indies antipodes,
the sea of Tranquility (on the moon) are yoked with another set
of modern images - traffic light on 57th and Dorchester, hashish,
moonshot, blue guitar, passport etc. The poet further notes in
order to marke the Buddist conscious how the "country", that is,
the country of all Buddhists'quest, salvation, is not reached by
any modern enlightened ways. The Zen Buddhist is surely oblivious of the enlightenment which comes by way of meditation and intuition rather than by way of the study of the scriptures or the indulgence in all modern sophistications that America could easily afford. That is why in the fourth section of the poem, the poet comes up to teach one saner thing to the monk who is "always so perfectly sane": and watch for the last step that's never there.

The implication ironically is towards the step that is "ever" there but "never" seen. What is needed to see the "last step" above the "flight of stairs" is the intuitive eye and not the rolling eyes on the head to "watch" with. Consciousness in a flux does never certify a sudden dislocation of the first from the last. To quote Bergson, "this amounts to saying that there is no essential difference between passing from one state to another and persisting in the same state. If the state which 'remains the same' is more varied than we think, on the other hand the passing from one state to another resembles, more than we imagine, a single state being prolonged; the transition is continuous. But just because we close our eyes to the unceasing variation of every psychic state, we are obliged, when the change has become considerable as to force itself on our attention, and to speak as if a new state were placed alongside the previous one"\textsuperscript{12}.

In another poem, "Waterfalls in a Bank"\textsuperscript{55}, Ramanujan's sardonic tone turns out to be one of sharper, bitter disgust. His strong attack on "a paralytic saddhu", the tapdancer of St. Vitus,
is intended to bring out the incongruity between the saddhu’s sensual joy from passing urine at "red" oleander flowers and his professed way of life.

By now, it is evidently clear why Ramanujan satirises the monks and their professed tenets while they keep repressed the normal, spontaneous being within. Joy and shock visit the monks or saddhus, because all this is due to the magic of a moment and more so, because the life is in a flux. And Ramanujan’s faith in the body is re-affirmed by his typical way of ironic indirections - positive thoughts are arrived at by negative means, by his sarcasms thrown at the so-called pure and sacred minds.

Again in "Death and the Good Citizen" the Hindoo way as well as the Christian way of life are brought within Ramanujan’s all pervasive ironic fold. If the Hindoo ethos around the dying is magnificently evoked with subtle ironic nuances, Ramanujan’s ironic digs at the Christian way of looking at the dead can also be counted from the repeated emphases on "you" in the following stanza:

Good animal yet perfect citizen, you, you are biodegradable, you do return to nature: you will your body to the nearest hospital, changing death into small changes and spare parts;

Ramanujan’s rather serious scepticism of the Hindoo outlooks is revealed in "Questions". The epigraph of the poem is from Mundaka Upanishad, which would in paraphrase read -
The body, the world is the selfsame tree;  
the jivatman and Atman like two  
friendly birds live in the same tree, while  
the material self eats the fruit of  
the tree, thereby, being entangled in  
the worldly life, the Supreme Self (Atman)  
sits unattached to worldliness, blissfully  
indifferent to all worldly activities.  

This Upanishadic wisdom, as Ramanujan perceives, seems failing  
to answer the Down's syndrome, that is a genetic defect in the  
Mongoloids. Even this wise philosophy fails to explain some sad  
mysteries like "dead twin's cord of birth noosed around his  
brother's neck" or "a favourite dog eating puppies" in the garden.  
In his ingenious way, Ramanujan also aims his ironic flourishes  
at Brahman Himself who sits unattached, watching only the sad lot  
of man right from the every birth to his death. Perhaps, the poet  
could also include Brahman into the category of all the watchers  
in "Watchers", who are termed as "unwitting witnesses, impotence  
their supreme virtue". He expresses his disillusionment with the  
religious seers, the political watchers, the philosophers, cate-
gorised as the impotent watchers who do not feel the pang or pain  
in others, because they are "cool" like the fire in a morror.  
But this disillusionment gets compensated with some real satis-
faction in "a dog who groaned human in his sleep and barked at  
spiders". As we know, Ramanujan has his characteristic way of  
appreciation for a prerational, elemental life-form, which the  
dog-image here implies, in contrast to the cool watching, wise-
looking philosophers.
But then Ramanujan's ironic sense is resilient, it returns, it strikes. The myth of Kama, the love-god with five impregnable sensual shafts, that occurs in "One, Two May be Three, Arguments Against Suicide"—comes within an ironic exposure. Kama, an interesting mythical figure, wielding his floral arrows is at the heart of Kamasutra of Vatsyayana. But my interest in the poem is to study Ramanujan's irony in special.

Desire, bodiless, is endless
Remember what the wise callous hindus
said when the love-god burned: keep your cool,
make for love's sake no noble gesture.

Here, the poet addresses to the reader, or imagined audience to "remember" what a moral lesson, the episode of Kama as burnt to ash, imparts. To "remember" is, ironically meant, not to follow the wise sayings of the "callous hindus". The poet's sympathy either with the hindu philosophers or the reader is absent. This is a case of overt irony.

All symbol, no limbs, a nobody all soul,

\[ Kama, \text{ only you can have no use} \]

for the Kamasutra
Ashes have no posture.

In these lines, there is sympathy with Kama, who is the poet's audience here. Irony through the negations becomes the way of empathy: that is typically Ramanujan's mode of ironic viewing of something. And this is here a case of veiled irony.

These two types of irony enforce the plea to making "noble gesture" for love's sake, for body's sake. The other subtle meaning is that when there was Siva, there was Kama, too; when
there is soul, there is body, too. That why, the two types of irony are moulded by Ramanujan into a self-sustaining mechanism which affirms a defense for the body-life principle. As the obverse (overt) irony turns outward like a centrifugal force, in a manner of true assessment of the "wise callous hindus": the inverse (veiled) irony turns inward like a centripetal force, in a manner of self-knowledge, but both being simultaneous to balance the momentum of Ramanujan's "arguments against suicide". Technically, Ramanujan as an ironist is a strategist, and as a visionary, his irony has all pervasiveness.

In an important respect, Ramanujan has a distinct way from the great moderns, i.e., in his ironic treatment of the gods, who have perhaps a better time with the great moderns. But to Ramanujan, as human beings are, so are gods, none immune to criticism. Of course, Ramanujan's ironic spear is hurled at his gods, only in moments of his vision of their momentaneous greatnesses, or their odd dispositions that exhibit only at certain pressing turns of history.

But in the poems of socio-political import Ramanujan's irony is no longer marked by its subtlety, it loses itself into sarcasm. "An Image for Politics" and "Lac into Seal" are two poems that indicate Ramanujan's characteristic attitude to politics and the politicians in general, Significantly, the poet's use of some specific verb-patterns in relation to the politicians beings out the meaning he tries to impart—"gasped", "devouring", "struggle", "rent" "rots": and his ironic implication is resonant in his use of "lived", and "pluck and serve". The verbs are so designed as
to prove that a man is best known by his action. And the attributes or analogies like "mackerel", "worms", "cannibal", giants", "wrestlers on a cliff", "triumvirate" are a catalogue, indeed in order to induce irritations and breathless gasps in the readers, about the politicians who by their very nature are capable of inflicting ills on us, the way the worms and the like do. As a poem, "Lac into Seal" is livelier with such images as supported by their verbs, and there is enough breath for the readers' imagination to share the poet's experience of the politicians. The title is metaphorically meaningful and ironically it reflects on the politicians' dream for the "seals of state and of brass". "A Certain Democrat" projects a democrat who is a study in self-contradictions and more, while he feels ashamed of his cousin's beastly "living with a fourth in exclusive sin", his own nature cries for "sin", for "violation". The poem reflects that, "the mere thought of white enamelled eyeballs on the faces of lean black men" rushes all his "gall" and blood. Heterosexuality is all that a liberal democrat practises though he professes of all morals. In "Dancers in a Hospital"—SS, the familiar sarcastic voice of Ramanujan, the ironist is heard also:

wet/newspapers with a seepage of back page news in international latrines
with Reagon or Mao
under our feet.

Ramanujan seems to be intent on bringing the image of "watchers" within his ironic bulldozing. He is severely critical of the social and political scientists, the watchers who fail to
connect "beasts with monks", and "slave economies" with "the golden bough". Most probably, his criticism of these watchers has his private angle, that is, the critics of his art are still cool like the "fire in mirror", are still watching without being affected even slightly by anything he has meant so far. The poet is also sarcastic about the newspaper readers who grow a habit of unconcern toward the events of "daily" miseries and ravages as reflected in his "One Reads". He satirises modern man's concept of time in "On a Delhi Sundial": he is sensitively aware of some deadness and stolidity that grow into habit with the frequenters of museums as in "Time to Stop": he has also dramatically highlighted his ironic perception of time that is mechanically accepted and of time that is naturally lived in "Time and Time Again". Here, the tower-clock, the image of our mechanical time is seen as knocked out by a "precise act" of lightning, a symbol of the real time, the flux.

Behind Ramanujan's characteristic ironical attitude to a street dog or a rickshaw puller: to the striders or the army ants, there is an elusive spirit in him, which prompts the poet to merit the subject on its own strength. Thus, the rickshaw puller in "Rickshaw Wallah" is not a familiar figure to be studied in terms of our pity or his poverty. His "arms and legs were wholly literate", he needs no "compassion to redeem the damned". Similarly, "Epitaph on a Street Dog" evidences the strength of a bitch:

our bitch had all her mangy suitors

Peacocks may have eyes in their tails and crests
But she had in a row four pairs of breast.
The poet here is of course, alive to a stark and cold reality that characterises the bitch's existence, but nevertheless, he is more alive to her strength, hence his irony is mingled in a harsh reality to mould it into a softer vein.

Last but not the least, one sustained characteristic of Ramanujan's ironic flourishes is to re-affirm his faith and joy in living the life, in living the body. His ironic digs at an astronomer in "Astronomer" are an indirect way to be alive in the body. Because, his essential man is one of blood and flesh. And this might be the reason why the persona in "A Hindu to His Body" aspires to rise up like sap in a three after his death, to "feel the weight of honey-hives". But this is one reason in "Conventions of Despair" why he utters:

It's not obsolete yet to live
in this many-lived lair
of fears, this flesh.

And this is the reason when he says in "One, Two, Maybe Three Arguments Against Suicide",

All symbol, no limbs, a nobody all soul,
O Kama, only you can have no use
for the Kamasutra.

Ashes have no posture.

In this chapter, how Ramanujan's irony is multifaceted and how it is all pervasive are discussed. But significantly enough it is found that his irony intersperses his essential vision of the self. In this context, Ramanujan's individuality is again asserted. Again, that irony is not merely a mode ideal for an
alienated mind is looked into, in relation to Ramanujan's belonging to his ethos, and it is found that his ironic mode is in conformity with his vision of ambivalent wholeness. Moreover, the viewpoint that Ramanujan's world-view is existentialistic is examined and seen to be untenable. It is established further that Ramanujan's all pervasive irony yields a positive force on the standpoint that the artist is on the side of life, and that his faith and joy in the body is in tune with his vision of the essential man.

Endnotes:
7. ibit p.120
9. ibid p. 30
10. ibid p. 28
11. ibid p. 21, 23, 26-27